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JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina





I'll help you.

The
Ashen Witch
ELAINA

A girl who became
a witch, the highest
rank among mages, at
a very young age. She
can be scathing and
bitter, but deep down
she's really kind.
Well, probably...

THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA

CHARACTERS

VIVIAN

A popular instructor at Latorita State University. An excellent witch proficient in wind magic.



ARIADNE

A student at Latorita State University. A normal girl who cannot use magic.

PRISCILLA

A novice and self-proclaimed genius who has fully immersed herself in the creation of mysterious potions.



DOROTHY

A girl who, at just fifteen years old, has had a string of consecutive victories in the mage sport of broom racing.





We walked side by side out of the courtyard,
onlookers staring daggers at us the whole way.

“What
are you
doing,
Ariadne?”

“Oh,
Elaina.
You’re
late.”

She gave the crowd a big wink
and trotted over to where I was standing.

WANDERING WITCH 6

The Journey of Elaina

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WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

6


NEW YORK

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Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Translation by Nicole Wilder

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CHAPTER 1

Broom Racing

Our city isn't like most other cities. You could say the thing that makes us unique is written all over the place, plain for anyone to see.

This is my hometown, where I was born.

It's called Race City.

To a local like me, the odd scenery you see all over town—from the curving arcs of the rooftops to the ropes stretched like webs above roads and alleys—seems completely ordinary, but newcomers to our city are invariably captivated by the peculiar terrain, and it makes their eyes sparkle at the sight.

Elaina, walking along beside me, was no exception.

"I see... So hitting one of the ropes would be an instant disqualification. Is that right?" She was keeping up a calm, contemplative appearance, but I could tell that she was quite excited.

I nodded at Elaina. "Exactly right. So the jockeys have to pilot their brooms skillfully to avoid hitting the ropes."

"But if they fly too high, they'll waste too much magical energy, right?"

"That's why everyone flies as low as possible, choosing to skim the ground, instead."

"Huh..."

"Also, offensive magic is prohibited. This race is a contest of speed and nothing more."

"I see..." Elaina nodded, her mouth hanging open.

Immediately after this exchange, mages flying on brooms passed directly overhead.

They dashed across the sky, cutting nimbly through the wind and avoiding the curved roofs—turning just in the nick of time—and disappearing off into town.

They were athletes in the middle of practice.

And that's why this place is called Race City.

Currently, the big craze is magical broom racing. Everyone in the city wagers money on the outcomes, shifting between joy and sorrow with every result. In other words, it's simply gambling.

Anyhow, true to its name, Race City is just the place for that kind of competition.

Elaina watched after the competing mages high in the sky, then looked back at me, and said with a smile, "So what was it you wanted to ask me?"

"...Do you want to try entering one of the races?" I asked her directly. "With me, that is."

These high-flying contests are known generically as broom races—BR for short—and I'm one of the jockeys. Meaning, I compete in the races. And I don't mean to brag, but despite my age, I can hold my own against the other jockeys.

I'm, without a doubt, the youngest racer ever. And after I made my professional debut, I won nine consecutive championships.

So you'll have to excuse me if I have a high opinion of myself. But too many hardheaded adults feel like it's their mission to whittle down the ambitions of this young, talented outcast.

"This race is going to be different from the others. There's a bit of a twist."

When I went down to the racing grounds to register for that weekend's competition, the man at reception told me something surprising.

I was struck by his words like a bolt from the blue.

"In honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the broom races, we are holding a two-person team race. Accordingly, I must ask you all to enter as pairs."

In other words, what you're saying is...

"...You need another person with you to enter."

At present, there are eleven people registered as broom jockeys—the exact number of active mages in the city. And five teams had already submitted their

entries.

In other words, I didn't have what was required to participate in what would have been my tenth championship. And the prize for a tenth consecutive victory was a sizable purse; a prize that no one had ever managed to claim.

The adults probably couldn't stomach the idea of a young girl like me taking the prize. That's why they're conspiring to force me out of the race.

"Oh my. Were you planning on participating in the race, too?"

A voice called out to me mockingly from behind as I stood at the reception desk.

Without even turning around, I knew who the voice belonged to. It dug into me like a splinter.

"...Sherry."

"Hmm? Show some respect, little girl." She sounded irritated. "You know that the deadline for entry is today, right? You don't think you can show up at the last minute and still race, do you? Give it up."

When I turned around, she was wearing a triumphant expression.

Sherry had been the reigning champion...at least until I started racing. Now, she hated my guts and constantly complained about me, as if her bitter curses could somehow break my winning streak.

"Ah, delightful. A race without you in it. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to this!" She snickered and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Well, make sure you watch from the spectator seats, okay? Watch me win, that is."

"....."

"....."

We glared at each other for a moment, and then Sherry snorted and strode off to the racing grounds to practice. After a moment, I also walked away...to go find a partner to race with me.

"....."

After my debut as a jockey, I became something of a pariah on the race

circuit. Just imagine—a fifteen-year-old kid beating a field of adults in her debut match, then going on to defend the title. I think that if I were in their position, I would be feeling just as jealous.

I wasn't so dull that I couldn't tell that while people throughout the city were excited by my appearance, the other jockeys—as well as management—were not happy.

But...

Who could have imagined they would use such an underhanded method to end my winning streak?

There were only eleven mages in the whole city. Meaning that I would have to find an outsider, a foreign mage who knew their way around a broom, if I had any hope of entering the race.

As if such a person would just conveniently appear before me...

"Ah, hey, you over there. What's wrong? You seem pretty bummed. Something bothering you?"

Suddenly, somebody called out to me as I trudged along.

It was a girl with long, ash-colored hair. She was wearing a black robe and triangular hat, and if I had looked, I would have seen a star-shaped brooch on her breast. She appeared to be a little bit older than me.

"If you want, I could read your fortune for you." She was sitting quietly by the side of the road, holding a crystal and looking somewhat like a fortune-teller. "My predictions have a reputation for accuracy."

"....."

"Hmmm..." I hadn't asked her to, but the girl held her hand above the crystal and began making a prediction. "Ah, I see, I see. It's all clear to me. Yes, perfectly clear. There's something troubling you right now, isn't there? Well? I hit the nail on the head, didn't I? My predictions often do."

Anyone can see I'm upset just by looking at me!

"....."

“Oh, the fee for a fortune is one gold piece.”

“What a rip-off...”

“My fees are high because I’m a witch.”

“...A witch?”

Huh? A witch? Like, the highest rank of mage? That kind of witch?

“That’s right. Here, look at my brooch. See? I’m a witch, right?”

I didn’t notice until she pointed it out. Now that I got a proper glance, I saw that she was dressed in a robe, which showed she was a mage. She also had a star-shaped brooch, proof that she was a witch. I had been totally out of it, so I guess I hadn’t noticed.

“All righty, pay up.” The witch extended one hand toward me and demanded money.

If this person would be willing to join me... Well, winning the race wouldn’t be a long shot, would it?

“.....”

And so, I grabbed hold of her hand with both of mine and stared into her eyes. “Um...I’ve got something I want to ask you...”

“Huh?!”

She suddenly looked terrified.

Her eyes went wide, and she shouted in a shrill voice, “H-huh?! Let me guess... You don’t have any money, so you want to pay me with your body... Is that it? I’m sorry, but that kind of thing is a little outside my area of expertise...”

She said some things that I didn’t really understand, so I ignored them.



Shortly after our exchange, the girl with very, very light purple hair tied up in bunches on either side of her head told me that she was fifteen years old. She then bowed, pigtails swaying, and formally made her earnest request: “Please enter the race with me.”

She kept her head down for exactly three seconds, then looked up at me with

brilliant blue eyes.

She told me her name was Dorothy.

In order to compete in the next race, she needed a partner—a mage, to be more specific.

Do you mean me? I'm blushing.

I was grinning as Dorothy looked back at me earnestly.

"If we win the race, we'll get paid..."

"Oh?"

"And if you help me out, I'll give all the winnings to you, Elaina."

So your plan was to lure me in with money, huh? Sorry, I'm not such a cheap date. And anyway—

"But then you get nothing. What's in this for you?"

"Don't worry. If I win this time, it'll be my tenth consecutive victory, so I'll get a special prize in addition to the usual winnings."

"I see... Then I want that as well."

"But if I do that, then I really won't get anything out of this..."

"Well, you *definitely* won't make any money if you can't even enter the race, so what's the difference?"

"You're not going to enter?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Getting my hands on that money sounds pretty sweet, but...

With what little I knew of the situation, I thought it would be too careless to just nod along and agree to whatever she said.

That would really make me look like a cheap date.

"Please, find it in your heart... I'm begging you... Enter the race with me, please..." The girl bowed very deeply, three times in a row. "I have to win this race, no matter what... I couldn't bear to lose to all the wicked adults around here...!"

My fortune-telling act must have put Dorothy in the mood to share, because she started telling me all about her life. She told me everything, from when she first became a broom jockey, right up to the present moment.

The more she told me about her situation, the crazier the story got.

She was the youngest jockey and possessed a real talent for the sport, and was well aware of that fact. Of course, she was resented by the adults around her, and she understood that, too.

Something about her story...seems awfully familiar.

“Why do you want to win the race so badly?” I asked out of curiosity.

She answered me without a moment’s hesitation, “There’s someone I need to beat, no matter what.”

This girl was being shunned for having ambition. She hadn’t done anything wrong, but she was about to be shut down by the adults simply because of her youth.

Well then...

It was probably my imagination, but for some reason, I felt an affinity for this girl. Her situation reminded me of my own youth. Unfortunately.

And so, for one reason or another, I agreed to her request.

“Fine, I’ll help you.”



“Oh, you managed to find another mage to join you, huh?”

Dorothy had taken me to the racing grounds. The man at reception turned to us in surprise.

In addition to the receptionist, the athletes returning home after practice also looked surprised—or rather, those mages displayed their loathing openly, even spitting some rude words our way as they passed us by.

“Who’s this woman...?”

“Huh? You’ve gotta be kidding me! Who is this woman? There’s no way you’re gonna let someone like her participate, right?”

There was even one mage who was shouting hysterically, completely out of control.

Wow, Dorothy sure is unpopular...

But there's something very nostalgic about this feeling, with everyone glaring at me...

"I'm going to race, too. Please allow me to enter," said Dorothy confidently.

"Sure, I don't mind if you participate. You followed the rules and brought a partner, after all."

The man at reception spoke in a businesslike manner and handed us application forms.

As I was filling out my own, I noticed someone sidling up next to me. It was the mage who had been yelling hysterically.

She glared at me while completely disrespecting my personal bubble. "...Do you have any racing experience?"

"None at all."

"Really...? Well, in that case, try not to embarrass yourself while racing with this little girl. Especially since we're going to win."

I suppose learning that I was inexperienced produced a sort of calm in her. And I suppose that she was looking down on me because I was young like Dorothy.

Neither of those things really bother me, though.

Nevertheless, I couldn't let them get away with such disrespect.

I glanced at the mages around us, and said, "You should all be careful as well, okay? Careful that me and this 'little girl' don't walk all over you."

Ignoring the mages as they grimaced at my words, Dorothy and I headed off to practice.

Apparently, the jockeys stored their brooms in lockers provided by the groundskeepers. With practiced motions, Dorothy took her own broom and hopped on.

“Okay, please get on.”

There was something wild about her gesture as she signaled with her thumb that I should board behind her.

“...Thanks.”

And with that, the curtain rose on our training montage.

Well, with a witch like me riding with her, I’m sure this broom will cruise right along.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

An adorable scream rang out over the city. Of course, I would never scream like that, so it wasn’t mine; it belonged to Dorothy.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

That one was mine. Not cute at all, right? I already know.

The two of us toppled from the broom simultaneously, got caught by the ropes waiting below, and eventually came to a stop, suspended in midair.

We were supposed to be practicing for the race, but...to put it plainly...it wasn’t going well. Our performance was beyond awful. We were so bad that we probably should have just thrown in the towel right then and there.

What happened to cruising right along? This ship is as good as sunk!

We talked such a big game before, so why are we so pathetic?

“...Elaina...could it be that you’re terrible at handling a broom?” Dorothy asked as she dangled from a line alongside some laundry that had been hung out to dry.

How rude.

“I’m a witch, you know! There’s no way I would be bad at it, is there? Are you underestimating me?” My cheeks puffed up with anger as I dangled from my own line.

“No...but I can fly more skillfully when I’m by myself.”

“Well, now that you mention it, I can also fly a lot better alone.”

But strangely, when the two of us flew on Dorothy's broom, sitting one behind the other, it didn't go well at all.

As exhibited a moment ago, the broom suddenly became impossible to control, and the two of us would fall off in perfect harmony.

But what exactly could be causing it...?

"I wonder if the broom is no good... Maybe it's not suited for two riders?" Dorothy put a finger to her lips in thought, then nodded. "...Elaina? If it's all right, could we try your broom?"

"Ah. My broom is designed for one rider, so...no."

"You're heartless."

"...More importantly, my broom is the one I use for traveling, so if possible, I'd rather not send it out racing and stuff."

Besides, it looks like the racing brooms have to be left on the racing grounds. If that's the case, I'm even more inclined to refuse.

"....." As she swayed on the laundry line, Dorothy snickered, "Send it out racing? Sounds like you treat your broom like a person!"

That day was the start of our practice rides together, but in the end, it was a total bust.

What on earth could be going wrong...?

"Elaina, could it be that...you're too heavy, or something?"

"Do you want to get your head smashed in?"



Collaborating with the girl had more than a little merit for me, too.

"Elaina, you're a traveler, right? Would you like to stay at my house until the race this weekend?"

She was the one who proposed such an arrangement.

While she was at it—

"We have tasty food, too."

And—

“Our bathtub is big.”

Plus—

“We’ve got an extra room, so you can sleep comfortably in your own bed.”

She tried several different tactics to entice me, and I was readily enticed. I went with her willingly. Allow me to amend my previous statement about not being a cheap date.

“Please, come in. Welcome to my home.”

Dorothy had led me to a housing complex on a corner lot.

There sat a common, middle-class house. The building wasn’t very old, but it wasn’t new, either, and it fit right in with the rest of the city’s scenery. We went in through a vestibule and up the stairs to the second floor, which was apparently where she lived. After we had climbed the stairs, she yelled, “Mom, I’m home!” then unlocked the door and went inside.

“Oh, welcome back.” On the other side was a woman with light purple hair, who came to greet her with a smile. “...And who is this?”

“This is Elaina. She’s going to enter the next race with me,” said Dorothy.

“Oh...”

Dorothy’s mother’s expression seemed to cloud over for a moment.

But as soon as I noticed it, she was back to normal.

“More importantly, Mama, you’re up today. Are you all right? Did you take your medicine?”

Dorothy’s mother smiled at her daughter’s words, but she did seem a bit tired. “I’m okay. I feel fine today.” Her skin was so pale and delicate that it looked like it might dissolve if you touched it, and her body was terribly gaunt.

It was clear she was suffering from some sort of illness.

“Wait just a moment, okay? I’ll get dinner started right away.”

Dorothy zipped around the apartment. She quickly located all the ingredients,

donned an apron, and grabbed a kitchen knife.

As the small girl headed for the kitchen, she was the spitting image of a doting daughter helping her mom out with dinner. But in this instance, there was no joy in the mother's eyes.

"....."

Anyhow, that was how I came to intrude upon their daily lives.



Starting the very next day, we began devoting our time to training. After waking up in the morning, we would head off to practice, only returning home after we were worn out and exhausted. It was a brutal routine.

We would always start out okay, but after a short flight, our broom would inevitably take a nosedive, and we would plummet. Again and again, we found ourselves dangling awkwardly from the safety ropes. After several days and many, many, many, many attempts, all we managed to accomplish was looking like a pair of clumsy puppets.

"Well now! Just as I suspected, you can't even fly straight! Ha-ha-ha, how hilarious. Even if you end up participating in the race, that won't change the outcome!"

Someone was there, laughing loudly and watching the two of us with contempt, even though we were spending our every waking hour training.

"...Sherry."

"Huh? Say my name with respect, little girl!" *Ptooie!*—the woman spat on the ground. "If you two fly like that in the real match, your defeat is assured!"

She showered us with abuse from above before eventually returning to her own practice.

I couldn't help but get fed up with her haughty attitude before the race had even taken place. But honestly, I couldn't blame her for laughing at our pitiful performance.

I was miserable.

This whole situation was absolutely mortifying.

“...Why? Why don’t things go well when I fly with Elaina...?”

Unfortunately, I didn’t have the answer to that question.

“.....”

Beside me, Elaina was simply staring up at the sky. She had her gaze fixed on the other mages and was staying silent.

I wonder what she’s thinking?

Ugh, I bet she isn’t thinking a thing.

I bet I’m the only one bothered by our poor performance.

I can fly well enough when I’m alone. I’m really fast. But when Elaina joins me, it doesn’t go well, no matter what we try. When I fly with her, I feel like I’ve been shackled. What could be causing this weird phenomenon?

One day after practice, Elaina and I returned home all beaten up, ate dinner, and relaxed in the dining room. It was the end of the day. Mom was already asleep, so the two of us were alone.

“I want us to start practice in the afternoon tomorrow,” I said to Elaina as we were drinking our after-dinner tea.

“Hmm? Is something going on?”

“I’ve got work. So I can’t practice in the morning,” I said flatly.

Elaina replied, “Well, okay then...” and nodded.

After that, we chatted for a while, then both of us went back to our rooms and that was that.

“.....”

The night grew late, and my room was enveloped in total darkness.

Just as I was about to fall asleep, I heard a muffled sound. I could hear voices talking in the room next to mine—the room where Elaina was currently staying.

“Yeah, and so that’s—”

Could she be talking to someone? From the snippets I could make out, it didn’t sound like she was talking to herself.

“That’s right, so we...”

However, I found it a little bit strange that Elaina, who had only been in this city for a short while, would have invited anyone to her room.

Ever since meeting me, Elaina had remained by my side... Or so I thought. At least, I couldn’t imagine she had anyone else traveling with her.

If Elaina had any acquaintances here, it would have to mean she had already formed a relationship with someone before even meeting me.

“...tamper with the broom...”

What little I could hear from the conversation in the next room wasn’t very clear at all.

Tamper with the broom.

That’s when I had a realization.

Ever since I had met Elaina, since we had decided to enter the next race, this whole time, I had blindly trusted her.

But is she even someone I can trust? Is she really just an ordinary traveler?

My mind ran through other possibilities.

One was that Elaina was an agent planted by race management. Or maybe she was working for Sherry, and she’d been tasked with keeping tabs on me...

How do I know I can trust her?

Awful speculations swirled around and around in my mind, keeping me up late that night.

Early the next morning, I awoke before anyone else was up, prepared breakfast for two, and left the house.

I headed out to my part-time job. When I wasn’t practicing, I worked hard to earn extra money.

“I’ve still got enough savings, so you don’t really need to work, you know?” My mother was always telling me that, but I could imagine that if I didn’t have employment when my athletic career came to an end, in time, our finances would be scraping the bottom of the barrel.

I also took a job delivering newspapers since it would double as extra broom training. Dodging the ropes strung all across town as I flew, I went around tossing papers to each house.

After flying around for several hours, I headed for the doctor's office.

"Please give me the usual."

I was already a regular with the local doctor. When I said, "the usual," the old man at the clinic said, "Here you go," and handed me a parcel.

"How has she been, recently?" The man looked at me as he packed up the medicine.

"How has she been...?" I struggled to answer. "Well, my mother's condition hasn't changed. I would love for her to be cured, though... If only I had enough money..."

"I see... Well, don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

"...Sure."

But if I don't push myself, I won't be able to cure her illness, so I absolutely have to win my tenth consecutive championship, right? Though the way things are going...who knows if that's even possible.

After finishing my part-time job, I went home briefly, but Elaina was already gone.

"I was sure that I left her a message telling her to wait here because I was coming back in the afternoon..."

Maybe she didn't notice the card I left along with the breakfast I made for her?

"If you're looking for Elaina, she went on ahead. She said she had an errand or something to take care of before practice." While I tried to make sense of what I'd heard, Mom continued, "She'll probably be there if you go to the race grounds, I would think."

"....."

What on earth could she have gone to do?

The incident from last night swirled around in my head, filling my mind with terrible thoughts.

From the moment I had fallen into this troubling set of circumstances—from the moment I had just so happened to meet Elaina—for some reason, I had placed my trust in her.

But was she really someone I could trust?

I wasn't so sure anymore.

Eventually, with my thoughts in disarray, I dragged my feet all the way to the racing grounds.

And then, I saw it.

There was Elaina, facing Sherry and laughing with her.

They seemed to be engaging in pleasant conversation.

And then...I saw those hands gripping my broom.

“...So *that's* what was going on...”

From where I was hiding, I was at their backs. I could only imagine how heartbroken my face looked.

They've probably been working together from the very beginning.

Elaina's secretly been meeting with this city's other athletes.

She must've messed with my broom, and that's why it won't fly right.

So I won't be able to perform...and I won't be able to win my tenth championship.

That was her plan all along.

I should never have trusted an outsider.

I could feel the icy thorns of regret winding their way around my heart.



By the time I woke up the following morning, Dorothy was already gone, just as she said she'd be. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I headed for the dining room, where I found breakfast laid out, along with a message that read: *Enjoy.*

I'll return in the afternoon. Please don't leave without me.

"Good morning."

By the way, there was already someone in the dining room.

Dorothy's mother was sitting in a chair, slowly eating her own breakfast. She noticed me and smiled gently, "Good morning. If you're looking for my daughter, she's already left for work." Perhaps she understood that I was concerned about her daughter's movements. She spoke as if she saw right through me.

"What does she do exactly?" I asked, taking a seat across from her.

She calmly pointed her finger out the window.

There was nothing outside but the scene of a town with ropes stretched from wall to wall.

But then, for an instant, a single broom passed by, slipping between the ropes. No sooner had I noticed it than I watched as a newspaper was tossed into a window on the other side of the street.

I see, I see.

"Newspaper delivery?"

You could say that's the perfect job for practicing broom handling.

"That's right. She's been practicing broom handling ever since she was small. That's how she got to be the way she is. These days, I think just about everyone in this city knows my daughter. She's a very special girl, and the youngest broom jockey to win nine consecutive championships."

Dorothy's mother was gazing out the window, squinting in the bright light. "Many people here know how hard she's worked. So many people are rooting for her from the bottom of their hearts. But you know, being a young and talented girl does attract attention, in good ways and bad."

"I'm sure."

Because the moment you show even a little enthusiasm, they say you're arrogant or emotional or whatever. I understand that quite well indeed.

“I’m sure that among all the people cheering her on, there are more than a few who are secretly hoping that she fails. Just like the other jockeys who enter the races, they’re hoping that she’ll give in at some point—that her star won’t continue rising forever.”

“...And you don’t want that to happen, right?”

“Indeed. That’s why I want you to be a good ally for her.”

“.....” I didn’t answer. “By the way, what kind of illness are you suffering from?”

It’s not like she’s trying to hide it or anything.

“Ah.” She made a small noise like she had just remembered something, then said, “It’s a heart condition. A terrible disease, really. It’s gotten so bad that I can’t even get out of bed without medication.”

“.....”

“So my daughter does the housework instead of me, and saves up all her money. With my health being what it is, I can’t even fly a broom anymore. I’ve become so useless.”

“...?” At that point, I suddenly noticed something.

The corner of the dining room was decorated with many trophies. And not just one or two. There were so many I couldn’t count them, and they shone brilliantly.

Prominently displayed next to them was a single photo. It showed a shy-looking young girl and a woman holding a broom in one hand, smiling at the camera.

It was a beautiful photo that looked like it had captured a particularly precious moment.

“That’s an old photo of us.” Dorothy’s mother followed my gaze, and said, “I was a broom jockey myself, once. A long, long time ago.”

And then, bit by bit, she told me an old tale.

It was the story of a certain racer.

This racer was a young mage who made a spectacular showing on the broom handling circuit. While raising her daughter, she kept entering the races, and she kept winning.

Sure, she lost here and there, but she never let that stop her, and she enjoyed far more victories than defeats. However, the older she got, the harder it became for her to win.

She developed a heart disease. However, she hid it from the world, and carried on like all was well.

Apparently, her daughter was incredibly inspired by her.

“Someday I want to be like my mom!” she often said.

Even as things got more and more difficult, the woman continued to struggle. She continued to compete and win. And she even set an impressive record, something no one before her had ever done.

Nine consecutive championships.

However, as she was nearing a potential tenth consecutive victory, with the whole city watching, believing that she would win— “Right in the middle of what would have been my tenth championship, the disease knocked me off my broom. I ended up losing my tenth competition.”

“...So now, your daughter is attempting to follow in your footsteps. Is that right?”

When I had first met Dorothy, she had said there was someone she wanted to beat, no matter what.

So this is what she meant.

But her mother shook her head slowly. “That’s not all. That girl wants to use the prize money to find a cure for my illness.”

“.....”

In other words, Dorothy was pinning everything on the outcome of the next race. If she lost, not only would she have failed the one person she cared about, but she might also have missed her only opportunity to find a cure for her mother’s illness.

She'd only ever had one choice to begin with.

That's why, even now, she was constantly putting in such hard work.

"By the way, you haven't yet responded to what I said earlier," Dorothy's mother said suddenly.

"...What do you mean?" I tilted my head quizzically.

"I asked you to become a good ally for Dorothy."

She stared straight at me.

So I stared straight back at her.

"You don't need to hear my answer."

Because I, too, have only ever had one choice, from the very start.

I wasn't just going to wait there for Dorothy, so I wandered over toward the racing grounds.

I feel like her message said something about waiting here, but why sweat the small stuff?

I cut across the grounds, heading for the locker where Dorothy's broom was stored.

"Well, if it isn't that little girl's friend! What are you doing in a place like this? Don't tell me you're practicing. Why bother when you're so bad?"

A strange voice called out to me.

Umm...if I remember correctly, that woman is...

"Sherry?"

"Hmm? Say my name with some respect! So much disrespect lately, my goodness!" Sherry spat on the ground and glared at me. "So, why did you come here? And where's your friend?"

"....."

I ignored her.

"Hey! Wait just a second!" She started after me. I opened the locker door to block her from my sight, took out the broom, and turned to leave.

But she stood right in front of me, blocking my way.

“...You’ve got some nerve, ignoring me.”

At the sound of her deep voice, I lowered my eyes.

But not because I was scared.

I looked down at Dorothy’s broom.

At first glance, it was just a worn-out old broom. Nothing strange about it. When I traced my fingers along the coarse wood of the handle, I could feel a smooth patch where the rider held on, polished by the touch of many fingers over the years.

However, when I took a closer look, I saw that it was full of tiny cracks, too small to sense just by touching it.

Brooms are sensitive objects. Mages apply magical energy to them and make them float through the air, but when the handle develops cracks or the brush end starts to split, then a broom will stop flying as expected. It’s possible this damage had upset Dorothy’s broom so much it was refusing to fly.

In fact, the previous evening, I had animated my own broom to ask her opinion, and she had said, “If the girl can ride her broom okay alone, but there’s trouble as soon as you get on with her, then it’s natural to conclude that there is some problem with the broom itself. For example, that it has been tampered with, or something.”

Tampering with the broom.

Of course. That’s it.

Upon further investigation, there were, without a doubt, traces of sabotage all over Dorothy’s broom.

“Are you the one who did this?”

I smiled as amiably as I possibly could while asking her the question, but Sherry just snorted and played dumb.

“Whatever could you mean?”

“I’m only going to ask you one more time, okay? Are you the one who did

this?" I asked again.

As expected, she just laughed and didn't answer.

That's when it happened.

"....."

I heard a sound behind me.

When I glanced back, I saw a girl running away.

She had light purple hair close in color to my own, bound up in pigtails on either side of her head. Her tiny, helpless back was to me.

"....."

I chased after her as soon as I was done dealing with the wicked woman.



After fleeing the grounds, I found myself at the place where I had first met Elaina. It was just an ordinary street corner, with nothing special about it.

There was hardly anyone around when I arrived at the place where, just several days ago, Elaina had been performing her suspicious fortune-telling. People were just passing on by.

They looked at me with puzzled expressions as they went.

".....*Nguh. Uwa...uwaahh...*"

That was when I realized that tears were spilling from my eyes. Pitiful sobs escaped my mouth, and wretched tears fell to the ground.

What am I so upset about?

"What are you doing?"

I was surprised.

When I turned around, Elaina was peering down at me, looking concerned.

I tried to turn away to keep from showing her my pitiful face, but Elaina put a hand on my cheek and prevented me from doing so. "...Are you crying?"

I covered my face with my hands again.

“.....” Somehow or other I could tell that beyond the barrier of my fingers, Elaina was wearing a troubled expression. She said, “Dorothy, that wasn’t what you thought it was.”

“I *know* what I saw.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do.”

“I’m telling you, you don’t.”

“...And I said I do, didn’t I?!” I was surprised. I didn’t know I could yell like that. “Turns out you’re just like the other racers, Elaina, laughing at me behind my back, huh? ‘*She’s just a kid,*’ they say. ‘*She’s so arrogant,*’ they say. The truth is, no one knows how hard I work!”

“.....”

“It’s not like I made it this far by accident! I practiced more than anyone, until I couldn’t lose, and finally made it this far! Before I knew it, I had lost all my friends and anyone else I could trust! But... But still, I never gave up, and I struggled all the way here! Why does everyone get in my way?!”

“...I’m different.”

“You’re not different! You were there laughing with Sherry, weren’t you...?!”

“.....”

Elaina looked troubled again and went quiet.

I guess I made her feel bad.

Well...good!

Elaina placed a hand on my shoulder as I sobbed and said only one thing.

“Why don’t you give your broom another try, okay?”

“...No way. I’m not racing anymore.”

“Well then, what will you do? You’re really going to let it end like this? Are you sure that’s okay with you?”

“.....”

I was at a loss for how to answer, and Elaina let out an exasperated sigh.

And then...

“...Excuse me for just a sec, okay?” she said calmly, as she went around behind me.

“Ah, hang on... Elaina, what are you—?” In my bewilderment, I forgot my sadness. Elaina ignored my protests and pulled me down onto the broom beside her. Then suddenly, we were gently lifting into the air.

“Wh-what are you doing?! Let me go! I said I didn’t want to race anymore, didn’t I?!” I kicked and struggled against Elaina.

“Too bad,” she said. “If you really hate it, you can always jump off, you know? Though if you fell from this height, I don’t think it’d end very well. There aren’t even any safety nets below us.”

Not to mention that I have someone whispering threats into my ear.

This woman turned out to be a lot worse than I thought...

“.....” About the time the broom rose among the rooftops, I gave up completely. We were drifting slowly toward the race grounds, as if Elaina wanted to get right to practicing.

“Try channeling a bit of magical energy into the broom, please.”

Elaina was a bit of a pushy person. Right after she bluntly said that to me, she took my hands in hers and forced me to grip the broom.

“...But if I do that, we’ll fall again.”

“Just trust me. I took care of it.”

“.....” Having already come this far, I did as I was told. After all, if I defied her here, Elaina would probably just boot me off the broom, and that would be the end of my protests (and more).

And so, as hesitant as I was, I channeled some magical energy into the broom.

My magical energy mixed with hers, and the broom once again began losing altitude...

...Except this time, it didn’t. The broom cut cleanly across the sky and

continued rushing through the city at a speed I had never experienced before. Before I knew it, the pleasant breeze had completely dried my tears.

“I knew as soon as I touched it,” Elaina said. “This broom was your mother’s, right? It’s quite old and has seen a lot of use, but...see these unusual cracks in the handle? Someone put them there to hurt your broom, and that’s making it hard for it to carry two people. So treat it carefully from now on, okay?”

I smiled again.

“You mean, treat my broom like a person, right?”



It was race day.

The race grounds buzzed with excitement, perhaps because of the fiftieth-anniversary celebration. It was like a festival.

The streets were teeming with tightly packed throngs of people, the windows of the houses along the course all stood wide open, and citizens were sticking their faces out, waiting eagerly for the race to begin.

“Whoa...it’s totally packed!” I gawked at the lively scene.

“Looks like there are more people today than usual.” Beside me, Dorothy spoke with the ease of experience. “It’ll start soon. Elaina, we’d better get going.”

Lightly grabbing hold of my sleeve, she pulled me along as we crossed the racing grounds.

The other mages were already assembled at the starting line.

The racers were adjusting their brooms, or gently floating in place trying to warm up, each doing their own thing, but all of them completely ignored us, like we didn’t even exist.

Of course, since the race was just about to begin, *she* was also there.

“Sherry.”

The mage who hunched her shoulders in surprise and turned around when Dorothy called her name was Sherry, the one who I was sure had tampered with the broom.

“...Ah, well...if it isn’t Dorothy. Is something wrong...?”

She had clearly lost her brazen energy from the day before. You could say she seemed disheartened. It was almost like she was frightened of something.

“Hmm? What happened? You’re not angry today like you always are.” Dorothy looked puzzled.

“Y-yeah...today I’m a little...well, I’m nervous, so...” Sherry’s gaze darted over to me. She seemed like a totally different person.

After cocking her head curiously at Sherry, Dorothy said, “Well, whatever. Let’s do our best in today’s race, okay?” She put on a smile, and walked away, leaving behind me and Sherry.

“...Let’s do our best, okay? Sherry?”

“...S-sure.” Sherry looked frightened, just like a small animal that had been cornered by a hungry predator. To calm her down, I put an arm around her shoulder.

“During the race, we’ll be on equal footing, so I really won’t mind if you come at us with everything you’ve got, you know?” I leaned in and whispered into her ear, “But outside of the race, I won’t look the other way if you use any of those dirty tricks of yours.”

“Ah, y-yes... I’m so sorry...”

“Are you? If you do any of that stuff again...”

You won’t get off so easy..., I thought, then followed after Dorothy.

I felt confident that no one, not even Sherry, would threaten Dorothy, or try to sabotage her ever again. I had made sure of that.

“...What did you talk about?” Dorothy asked, tilting her head sharply.

“It’s a secret.” I smiled.



A single shot from the starting gun was the signal for the race to begin. The sound made my heart leap in my chest. Looking like birds scattering in surprise, six brooms flew away from the starting line.

The brooms, each with two riders sitting one beside the other, streaked in straight lines over the city. Directly below us flowed the scenery of the city and the sounds of cheering.

The handling of our broom had been fully entrusted to Dorothy, though I could only see her back situated on the broom in front of me. As for my role, well, I sat in the rear, channeling magical energy into the broom. In other words, it looked like I was just sitting there doing nothing. That was how it felt, anyway.

Dorothy, on the other hand, was amazing.

There was no one who could keep up with her.

The long straightaway ended, and as we came into a curve, Dorothy pulled the broom sharply into a slant, and we cut the curve without dropping speed, blue sky spread out above us.

I turned to look and saw that the other brooms were gradually falling behind.

No one could catch up with Dorothy.

The cheers from the city grew louder as we approached the finish line. I could see people waving their hands. From the windows of houses, from the middle of the road, the voices of the people drove her along.

Dorothy's house was near the finish line.

From the window, I could see a single person, her mother, waving slowly.

Dorothy may have been shunned by her fellow competitors, and someone may have tried to sabotage her, but from the very beginning, none of that would have been able to stop her.

Because there was someone cheering her on.

"Elaina..."

When the goal was right before our eyes, Dorothy said my name quietly, without turning around.

Amid the clamorous cheering, amid the ceaseless flow of the wind, her voice alone was very, very clear.

“Thank you so much.”

I’m not sure what those words are for.

But there was only one thing to say in return.

“You’re very welcome.”

And then the flag came down on the race, marking the moment when a certain girl won her tenth consecutive championship.



“And she’s just taken her tenth consecutive championship! Incredible! It’s the first time anyone has accomplished that since this city’s founding!”

The announcer stirred up the crowd wildly, and the cheering got louder, and louder still. It was impossible to distinguish it from outright screaming.

After crossing the finish line, we hovered there, floating above a city that had been turned into a race course. It felt like we had become famous. The city below was engulfed in cheers. And so, we waved down at them, and before we knew it, both of us were grinning.

At last, I said, “Dorothy, you did it! Now your mom’s illness—”

I had been about to say something, when she interrupted me a little sheepishly. “...You heard from Mom? Well, now, finally, I think I can give my full attention to Mom’s treatment. We’ll have plenty of money,” she said, still waving at the city below.

Well, about that...

“By the way, about the prize money...”

“Huh? Talking about money so soon...how rude...” Dorothy narrowed her eyes at me.

No, no, no. You don’t understand what I’m trying to say...

“I was going to say that I don’t need it, but...”

“Huh?”

“The prize money, and the big championship bonus, too... You should keep both. I don’t need any payment. Don’t worry about it.”

“.....”

Dorothy looked bewildered. She wore a faint smile, yet at the same time, her eyebrows were raised in shock. “But in that case, you...”

“I’m not the kind of person who would take money from a little girl with a sick mom.”

Before I knew about her situation, I had considered taking the championship bonus from her... Like, *slightly* considered it. No really, I only thought about it a tiny bit, and then I’d also thought about getting some of the regular prize money, but...after I met her mother, any desire to do that completely evaporated.

“Is this the same Elaina who was running a scam in town saying that...?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Anyway, it wasn’t like I was *that* in need of cash. Even making money in town had been a temporary thing. Now it seemed to me that there was no big hurry. I didn’t need to take her money. Though perhaps that feeling was enhanced by the rush of our recent victory.

“You’d better go ahead and use the money before I change my mind, you know.”

“In other words, you’re saying to hurry up and find a cure for my mama?”

“You can take it any way you like.”

I looked away, and Dorothy let out a little giggle.

It had absolutely none of the gravity one would expect from someone who had just wiped the floor with her competition.

She was just one little girl, laughing like she was enjoying herself.

“Elaina,” After laughing for a little while, she said suddenly, “My objective was to break Mama’s record. My goal was to cure Mama’s illness. I’ve achieved both my objective and my goal. I’d call that a success.” Dorothy looked reinvigorated somehow.

“So, are you going to retire from racing?”

“Of course not.” She smiled as she spoke. “I’ve only achieved one goal, to break Mama’s record. I won’t be done for a long time yet. From now on, I’ll make a fresh start.”

Well then.

One way or another, and it could have just been my imagination, I felt like something about this girl’s new start had something in common with my own journey. It was just a feeling.

“That’s right.” I nodded.

And so, from here on, it begins.



“Heh-heh-heh...”

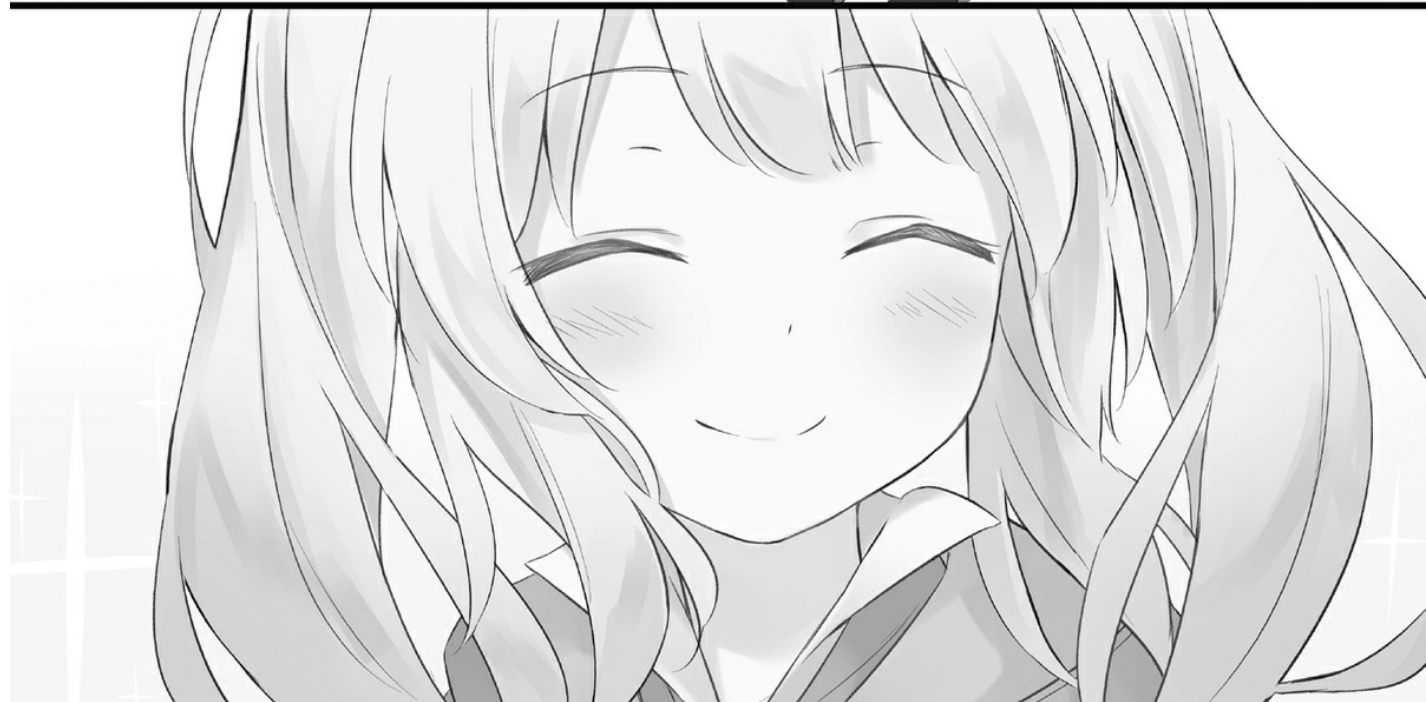
By the way, there was a good reason that a person like me, always eager to make some extra cash, had boasted about not needing the prize money.

That day, after we finished the race and I parted ways with Dorothy, I made my way back to the race grounds. Not for the purpose of racing. Obviously.

“Cashing these in, please.”

I submitted several slips of paper to the reception counter at the grounds.

They were tickets.



Tickets that I had filled out with my prediction for the winner of the race.

It was just something I had heard, but apparently you could place wagers on who you thought would win. Meaning that if your predictions proved to be correct, you could take home a lot of money.

Well, there was no way that I could have passed up such a tasty opportunity, you know? Especially because I was almost certain that we were going to win.

Is it really all right for there to be such an easy way of making money as this? Oh-hoh-hoh!

“All right, sure thing!” The girl at reception took the papers from me, and then, after looking back and forth from the tickets to my face, she went rather pale.

That’s only to be expected. I invested a huge amount of money into these tickets, so the returns must be unimaginable. It’s probably too much to dream that I might be a billionaire! Ah, what should I buy first? Hmm, maybe I’ll start by buying my very own bakery, eh? Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh!

And so on. I was ballooning up with wild ideas, when the receptionist said, “Umm, miss...the rules state that competitors cannot bet on the race...” Her tone was deeply apologetic. “...And so these tickets are invalid.”

“.....”

“Um...miss...?”

“...And refunds...are those possible...?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but the regulations state that we’re unable to give refunds...”

“.....”

“Um...miss...?”

“...Is there nothing you can do...?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“...No matter what?”

“Those are the rules.”

“.....”

“.....”

And so, the witch who had tried to run a filthy money-making scheme found herself out of luck once again.

Happily ever after.



CHAPTER 2

A Thief and His Mother

Awaiting me beneath clear skies after I passed through the gate was a wide avenue lined with evenly spaced trees. The roofs of the houses facing the avenue were covered with dry autumn leaves. When a cool breeze rustled through them, the brightly colored leaves lifted off and danced through the air as they fell.

There were almost no people on the street.

Though the scenery was rather lovely, the city felt lonely.

The wind blowing past me was cold, as if lamenting the desolation.

“.....”

When you encounter a deserted city like this, you know one of two things right away: Either the city is boring and there’s no reason to go out, or the city is dangerous and people are afraid to leave their homes.

So which is the case with this city, I wonder...?

“Hey, missy, stop right there.”

Hmm, I guess it’s the latter.

The man who had suddenly appeared in front of me to block my way looked quite young. He was brandishing a rather short knife. I couldn’t see his mouth well because he had a scarf wrapped around his face.

As he swayed his little knife back and forth like the head of a snake, the man let out a melodramatic cackle. “Heh-heh-heh... You understand what this is, right? If you put up a fight, your head can kiss your body good-bye, see?”

It was a pretty weak threat, all things considered. And the blade he was waving around looked like it could *maybe* cut a piece of fruit, or some cheap meat, at best.

I wonder if he’s okay? In the head, I mean.

Anyway...

“Okay, well, ignoring what you were saying for a sec...do you understand what this is?”

With a fingertip, I tapped the brooch I was wearing on my breast.

It was my witch’s brooch.

I’m a witch, the highest rank among mages, you know. You’re no match for me head-on. Didn’t you see this? I told him implicitly.

Most thieves would immediately beg for forgiveness as soon as they saw the brooch, or would take a closer look and say, “Eh-heh-heh, I was just joking, miss!” or shout, “Ah! S-s-s-sorry, wrong person!” before fleeing.

For that reason, whenever I catch sight of a thief, I try to show off my brooch right away. As long as I’m not way out in the sticks somewhere, it has proved to be pretty effective.

“Huh? What’s that? I have no idea.”

“.....”

Well I didn’t expect this place to count as being way out in the sticks!

I sighed and answered him. “Well, you see... I’m a witch...which means I can use magic. To put it simply, I’m very powerful.”

“Hmm. Powerful, huh? Like how powerful?”

“Incredibly powerful.”

Though it feels a bit shameless to say that about myself.

“If you were planning to threaten me and take all my money,” I continued, “you’d better stop now. I’ll hurt you.”

“I see...” The boy nodded, as if he understood what I was trying to tell him. “That’s great! Originally, I was planning to have you leave your money and get lost, but if you’re interested in standing up to me, that’s a different story. I’ll just have to take it by force, won’t I?”

Ah, he doesn’t get it at all.

“No, um... Why are you just assuming that we’re going to fight...?”

“I’m a bandit. And you’re my victim. So...yeah. Make sense?”

“Not at all.”

“Oh, you’re pretty dense, huh?”

“Are you really one to talk...?”

“Look, your only choices are to pay up or fight! Leave all your money behind and go, or I’ll have to take it by force... So, what’ll it be?”

“That’s not much of a choice, is it?”

“I’m making you choose. Heh-heh-heh...”

“But I just said that’s not really a choice...”

I just got to this city, and I am not really in the mood to fight in a place like this. And even if I manage to drive him away, there’s a possibility that I’ll attract even more unwanted attention from some weirdos or something. I’d like to wrap this up as quietly as possible...

“...Sigh. All right, fine. Come at me whenever you want.”

I squared my shoulders. It wasn’t so much that I was eager for a fight, but if the only other option was handing over my money...

“Heh...and I was just getting bored in this backwater town. Come on...make my day!”

Going all-out on this kid is only going to lead to more trouble. There’s no helping it then... Let’s freeze his feet in ice or something, as a warning.

“Oh, before we get into it, I just want you to know, flat-chested girls aren’t really my type, so... I’m definitely not trying to...y’know...do *that* sorta thing,” the boy ran his mouth as he fiddled with his knife.

Y’know what? Maybe I could hurt him just a little...

Seething, I reached for my wand, and then...

...in the middle of this desperate predicament (desperate for the thief, that is), a savior appeared.

Who could that be?

“Kou, darling! You forgot your lunch box!”

That’s right, it was his mother.

She appeared out of the blue. The woman approaching from behind the thief, outfitted in a house apron decorated with cute bunny designs, sandals slapping on the pavement with every mincing, pigeon-toed stride, was undoubtedly his mother. In her hand, carried aloft like a sacred flame and wrapped in a covering as adorable as her apron, she held a lunch box.

And then the holy mother presented the means of salvation (the lunch box) to the wannabe bandit.

“Here you go!” Her breathing was quite labored, probably from rushing, and her cheeks were a little flushed. “You’re such a scatterbrain!”

The young bandit looked utterly taken aback by this sudden development. When she gave him a good whack to the back of the head, it was not his body but his spirit that seemed to suffer the most damage.

“M-Mmmooooooooooooom! What’re you doing here?!” The thief...otherwise known as “Kou, darling”...seemed to forget all about the tough persona he’d been trying to project.

“Kou, honey, you forgot your lunch box, so Mama rushed to bring it to you, see? There’s no need to talk like that. You’ll make your mama angry!” The boy’s “mama” had her cheeks puffed out angrily.

“I d-don’t need no stinkin’ lunch box!”

“Even if I put those hamburger patties you like so much in it today?” She looked triumphant for some reason.

“I—I don’t want it! I don’t like them!”

“Well! You don’t have to be bashful just because you’re with your friend!” His mother slapped playfully at the bandit’s shoulder.

“Shut up and get out of here, Mom! I’m in the middle of work, so stay out of my way!”

The person in front of me was no longer a scary bandit; just a rebellious son arguing with his doting mother.

What is this? I feel like I'm looking at a child who's late for school.

"Okay, okay. Work hard, sweetie! And don't be late for dinner! I'm making your favorite, Salisbury steak."

"Whatever, just go! Seriously! I can't take it!"

"Yes, sweetie."

.....

The boy's "mama" tottered away, leaving an awkward silence hanging between us.



"Phew...sorry about that. All right then, let's pick up where we left off, shall we?"

After clearing his throat loudly, the bandit readied his knife again.

He looked at me with the eyes of a carnivorous beast that had cornered its prey. The glinting (paring) knife looked bloodthirsty as the light reflected off the blade tip.

I gulped. The sweat on my cheek ran cold.

The atmosphere in the ghost town was incredibly strained and full of tension.

You could tell that the area was about to become a battlefield...

"Kou, darling, do your best!"

Oh, come on...

There was the bandit's mother, sitting a short distance behind him on a comfy blanket. The blanket, which she must have brought from home, was a worn-out thing with a cutesy pattern that looked like it held many cherished family memories. She had a picnic basket with her, and she was nibbling adorably on a sandwich.

A picnic?

“What are you doing, Ma?!”

“Oh, don’t worry about me!” she giggled. “You keep working, sweetheart!”

“As if I could! Hurry up and leave! Don’t get in my way!”

“Okaaaay!”

.....

Yet another awkward silence.



“Phew...sorry again for the interruption. Okay, let’s try this one more time.”

The bandit readied his knife again.

But the traveler was no longer standing before him.

“Oh, try an egg salad sandwich. They’re really good! It’s my special recipe.”

“Mmm, it’s delicious.”

“I knew you’d like it!”

Seated gracefully on a blanket, two women were enjoying a picnic—the bandit’s mother...and a traveler.

It was still a pretty awkward scene, but the sandwiches were delicious, so I didn’t really care.

“Wait. Wait just a second! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Having lunch.”

“But we’re supposed to be locked in battle...”

“My tummy was getting a little rumbly, so can we do it later?”

“I don’t think that an epic battle is the kind of thing we can just reschedule...”

First of all, I lost all interest the moment I was threatened with a paring knife. At least come at me with some kind of legendary blade or mystical weapon or something... I mean, really!

“Say, Miss Traveler, what’s your name?”

“Elaina.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely name. And what kind of job do you normally do?”

Normally? I’m not sure how to answer that.

“I don’t do anything that you would typically call a ‘job.’”

“My, my... So you’re getting ready for married life?”

“Who said that?! I’ll have you know I am a traveler.”

I continued munching on my sandwich.

I feel like we’re on completely different wavelengths. But these egg sandwiches are so delicious, I honestly don’t care.

“Huh? But that’s a role you’re playing, right? I’m asking about your regular job...”

...What?

“A role?” I tilted my head questioningly.

I wish she would say what she means already. Her words need to be easier to digest, like these sandwiches.

She looked even more puzzled than I and said, “Yes... Elaina, you’re an actor, aren’t you?”

What in the world?

“I’m...not...”

“Goodness! Why, you even refuse to break character!” she marveled. “What a precocious child.”

You ought to look up the meaning of “precocious,” lady.

“But really, what kind of work do you normally do?” she continued. “Or perhaps you’re trying to make a living just by acting? Don’t you think your mother worries about you?”

“...But I’m not an actor.”

I see, so in other words, here’s what’s going on:

The mother of the bandit...otherwise known as “Kou, darling”...doesn’t have the slightest idea that her little boy is really a thief. She’s convinced that he is

doing things like this as part of some role that he's playing. I see, I see. In that case, now I understand how she can be so carefree and relaxed about all of this.

"...Okay, listen lady" I continued. "I'm going to tell you the truth, and this is true for me, too, but your son was never an actor."

"My baby boy...is not...an actor?" The bandit's mother raised her eyebrows in shock and tilted her head. "But little Kou is always practicing in front of his mirror, saying things like, 'Heh-heh-heh...gimme all your money!' you know? You're saying that he's not practicing to play a bad guy?"

"He's practicing to be a thief."

"...But a while ago, he said he needed the right clothing to be a bandit, and I made him the outfit he's wearing right now! You're saying that wasn't for a role?"



“That was so he could really look like a bandit.”

“Well...!”

Her eyes widened with astonishment.

Then, quite quickly, she leaped to her feet, and began pressing Mr. Bandit for answers. “Kou, honey, what’s this all about? Mama didn’t know anything about this!”

“Sh-shut up! It’s got nothing to do with you, Mom!” He was doing his best to act tough, but it was pretty hard to take him seriously.

“Waaah...Mama is so sad...! How did my little boy turn out like this...?” The mother of Mr. Bandit began sobbing.

Oh no, you made her cry.

The bandit was in a panic even without me shooting him a reproachful glance.

“...! A-aah...b-but this is just one of those things! I was just pretending to be a bandit, really! I wasn’t thinking of becoming one!”

If only she’d heard all the stuff he said when we were facing off earlier...

“Are you all right?” I moved to the mother’s side. I touched her shoulder gently and offered her my handkerchief, giving her son a reproachful look the whole time. I was acting like a schoolyard sidekick, scolding the boy who had hurt my friend. It was my way of showing gratitude for those delicious sandwiches.

“Thank you, Elaina...” The bandit’s mother accepted my handkerchief and immediately blew her nose, loudly.

Aww, c’mon, lady!

“Hey, Elaina? Here, take a look at this. This is a photo of little Kou when he was young.” For some reason, she suddenly pulled out a photograph of the bandit when he was a baby.

Were you just walking around with that?

“At this age, his dream was to become a sweet treat...”

“Huh...?”

What kind of dream is that?

“I’ve always remembered it because it sounded tasty... I think it was...a mafia?”

“Ma’am, that’s a common name for a criminal organization.”

I’m sure you confused it with “muffin.”

“Oh... I wonder when he began to tread down the path of delinquency...”

“He was probably a delinquent all along.”

He hasn’t evolved a bit since he was a child, has he...?

She couldn’t hold back her tears over her bandit son’s behavior.

“What do you think I should do?”

“It’s hard for me to know how to answer that...”

I glanced quickly over at Mr. Bandit.

He was standing a short distance away, fidgeting nervously. I was sure he didn’t really hate his own mother. He was probably just too embarrassed to be honest about his feelings.

I’d dealt with stubborn people before, enough to know that a lot of the time, offering your help only makes them dig in even further. Rather than a direct approach, it’s often easier to get results with a few white lies.

.....

Anyway.

About that time, I was struck with an idea for a secret plan.

“Ma’am, would you lend me your ear for a moment?”

And then I told her my idea.

Secretly.



“Phew...okay. I’m really sorry for all the disturbances. All right, let’s try this

one more time... Put 'em up!"

The young bandit shouted triumphantly. He had a black scarf wound around his mouth so I couldn't see the lower half of his face. He brandished a knife in one hand, and its glinting tip pointed at me with clear intent to kill.

"Your luck ran out the moment I laid eyes on you. Come on, gimme your money! All you got! If you don't like it, I'll take it from you by force!" the young man yelled.

A shocked traveler prepared to surrender, hands in the air. She shuddered and trembled with fear.

"Heh-heh-heh...now don't get any funny ideas! If you don't hand it over, I'll hit you with this ladle!"

Appearing suddenly from behind the bandit was another person—his comrade. A woman, who had gone home to change into an outfit that matched the bandit's, then slipped on her usual apron and sandals over the new clothes out of habit and returned to the scene carrying with her a ladle for a weapon. It was none other than the bandit's mother.

She had become his partner in crime.

"Wait..."

"Okay, Kou, sweetie! Do your thing! Let's steal all her money!" His mother was in frightfully high spirits.

"Hold up. What are you doing, Mom?"

"Hmm? Oh, sorry. I guess that was wrong... It's Mama's first time being a bandit..."

"No, that's not it."

"Maybe you're upset that I secretly made myself a matching outfit? Sorry! It was actually a lot of work, so—"

"No, that's not it, either. Um, it's just... What are you doing...?"

"I was worried about you, so I came back!" His mother winked so adorably you could almost see little cartoon hearts floating in the air after she spoke.

“From now on, I’m going to come along whenever you’re working, okay honey?”

“.....”

The bandit was completely deflated. He didn’t even have the willpower to yell at her. His paring knife fell to the ground on the spot and he crumpled to his knees.

For however long he intended to continue being a thief, the young man’s mother would be by his side.

The bandit covered his face with both hands, as if to shut out this new reality.

“Give me a break...”

How embarrassing... Not only was his mother accompanying him to work, but she had even dressed up for the occasion! The reality had torn his mind to shreds.

I placed a hand on the shoulder of the defeated young man and spoke plainly.

“You know your mom won’t follow you around if you just quit being a bandit, right?”

I was grinning.

In other words, if it’s not something you can do with your mother, don’t do it at all.



I stayed in the city for several days after that.

After the initial encounter, I didn’t particularly make any plans to meet with the two of them, and they say that such chance meetings are a once-in-a-lifetime thing, so I didn’t think I would see the pair again.

Not that I would have minded, terribly. I had been captivated by the taste of those egg sandwiches, after all.

On the day I was preparing to leave the city, by sheer coincidence, I caught sight of them again.

It was early in the morning. I saw a young man fly out of his house dressed in

a business suit. I couldn't see his face well, but both his hairstyle and his physique reminded me of the bandit I had recently encountered.

"Kou, darling! You're forgetting your lunch box! Your lunch box!"

An older woman hurried out of the house a few moments after the young man. Though I only saw her from behind, I was certain she was someone I had met before.

Ah, it's that mother-son duo.

I felt a little thrill, like I had caught sight of something rare and fleeting.

"Okay, do your best at work!" The mother handed her homemade lunch to her son, then waved to him as he sped off.

In the end, it seemed Kou had chosen not to continue pursuing the life of a brigand if it meant having his mother in tow. Apparently, he'd decided to look for a respectable job.

The people I saw there were no longer a pair of thieves.

They were simply a mother and her son.

Living happily ever after.

"I'm worried about him... I wonder if I should go with him to his new job, too?" The mother sighed and put her hand to her cheek as she watched the young man go.

.....

Okay, maybe not completely happy.



CHAPTER 3

An Honest Politician

The anonymous tip that the newspaper company received that day seemed, to the surprise of no one, to be part of a foolish grudge.

Inside the envelope that had been casually stuck between the front doors of the newspaper office were several photographs, bundled together with a letter. When you're in the business of selling information, these sorts of anonymous tips are commonplace, and they run the gamut from secrets that could throw a whole city into an uproar to complete and utter nonsense. The reporter, arriving at work early that morning, opened the letter, but didn't have much interest in the contents.

The city was in the midst of a presidential election. It wasn't like he had the time to spare chasing some cheap story. So long as it was nothing major, the reporter was thinking of tearing the letter up and tossing it out right then and there.

The fact is, what was written in that letter was pure foolishness.

The Ashen Witch, Elaina, who entered this city several days ago, is an evil witch. She tricked me, and I lost everything I own. I want my revenge on that witch. Do you think you could use your connections to hunt her down for me?

There was no name attached, just photographs of a young witch in her teens with ash-colored hair and lapis-colored eyes.

The reporter was, of course, already aware that a young girl holding the highest rank of mage—a witch—had arrived in the city some time ago. It didn't take a journalist's intuition; magic users were practically unheard of in that city, so a visiting witch was a rare event indeed.

Perhaps in quieter days, the reporter might have put together some material for an article about the witch's visit, but right now, the whole city was in the process of deciding its future. The newspapers had plenty of material already.

It went without saying that this was no time for a cheap story.

“.....”

Nevertheless, the reporter tucked the letter into his breast pocket before opening the office doors.



“Yeah, that’s great! That disgusted look in your eyes is just great!”

The *click-clack* of the camera shutter captured the dirty looks being thrown by the normally very tenderhearted and beautiful girl before it.

Who could she be?

That’s right, it’s me.

“Um...is that enough?”

“No, wait! Let me take just one more! Okay! For the next one, try holding this flower and smiling like this!” The man stuck his face out from the cloth hood of his camera and handed me a white rose. “Hold that in your mouth!” He gave me a thumbs-up. I considered smashing the flower instead.

I had been warned by people in neighboring countries: Apparently, photography was all the rage here, and it was common to be asked to serve as a subject by amateur photographers like this one.

Apparently, really common.

Today was the third day since I’d arrived, and I’d already lost count of the number of times I had been called out by these creeps and asked to pose for a picture.

“That’s great! ...Ah, hang on. I told you to hold that in your mouth, but...you threw it away... Ah! But that disgusted look in your eyes...it’s just great! Incredible! Just the best!”

Click-clack continued the camera shutter.

“I’m exhausted...”

In the end, after spending several hours trapped by the amateur cameraman, I finally escaped.

I had spent three days in this city already.

Today, as always, the main avenue was noisy and packed with people. Among all the hustle and bustle, I walked alone, wearing a weary expression, the clamor of the city ringing loudly in my ears.

Apparently, this city was going to hold a presidential election in several days' time, so the campaigning had reached a fever pitch. That explained why the place was in such an uproar.

"Shine a light on the disadvantaged! As a politician, I... I pledge to serve this city, for the sake of those who showed me the way!"

I walked down the main avenue and caught sight of a man speaking loudly atop a wagon in the middle of the street. He was wearing a black suit and was surrounded by a throng of people. He looked relatively young for a politician. If I had to guess, I'd say he was in his thirties.

The man's name was Matthew.

He was so famous that anyone who lived in this city—no, even someone like me who had only been here for three days—would recognize him.

VOTE FOR MATTHEW, FOR THE BRIGHT FUTURE OF OUR CITY!

Posters decorated with political slogans and images of the man in the black suit were plastered everywhere around town. When you see the same smiling face every day, for better or worse, you remember it.

"I will not abandon our citizens who are struggling in this recession! Do you know the most important thing for resolving the territorial dispute? I think it's forgiving one another! I, too, have made mistakes, and in the past, I even took a break from politics. But I faced the consequences, and my lovely wife, who forgave me, has brought me this far."

Well, whatever he was going on about was all nonsense to me.

But he appeared to have a certain amount of support among the people, judging by the comments from the crowd.

"He should definitely be our new president."

"I've never seen such an honest politician before."

Since I had set off on my journey as a witch before coming of age, and since I

had lived a life unconcerned with regional politics, I'm afraid the words being spoken on the eve of the election rang hollow in my ears.

Sweet talk is easy, but it doesn't get results. And every politician makes the same sorts of exaggerated promises, so it's not like there's a marked difference between them anyway.

The people of this city, however, seemed to feel otherwise.

A short way down the road from where Mr. Matthew was giving his speech, another person—another politician, clearly—was also speaking from the back of a vehicle. Though in this case, it was a luxury carriage rather than a simple wagon, and the man was definitely not young. You could tell just by looking that he was a veteran politician.

"I want to bring prosperity to all citizens. And prosperity is not what you'll get from a government run on youthful idealism. But it's something I can offer, precisely because of my years of experience guiding the development of our nation."

The man with the calm demeanor who was smoothly criticizing the young politician was Bernard.

A VOTE FOR BERNARD IS A VOTE FOR PROSPERITY FOR ALL

This man was also one of the candidates for president. I'd seen his campaign posters stuck on the walls of many people's houses.

In other words, the election for the next president seemed to be a one-on-one contest between the young Matthew and the veteran Bernard.

As for which one of them would be victorious, it was impossible to tell just from a quick look. Both the veteran and the amateur had people crowded around their wagons, in what appeared to be roughly equal numbers.

"Howdy-do, Miss Witch. Could I have a moment?"

I was standing there watching the speeches absentmindedly when a rather unassuming middle-aged man stepped in front of me, blocking my view.

.....

"Sorry, but if it's for a photograph, I must decline."

No way am I falling victim to another amateur cameraman.

I turned to flee.

“Huh? Wait, no, no! I’m not a photographer!” The man stepped in front of me, blocking my escape.

“That’s right, you’re not a photographer... Because you’re an amateur aspiring to become a photographer! That’s right, isn’t it?!”

“No, that’s not it...” He presented me with a business card. “This is who I am.”

.....

“Sorry, but I don’t have any interest in the entertainment industry.”

You’re going to butter me up, then try to get me into show business, right? Well, I won’t fall for that old trick!

Again, I turned and fled.

“No, I’m not attached to an entertainment company or anything...” Again, he blocked my path. “...And you have an awfully high opinion of yourself...,” he muttered.

“Huh... All right then, what are you?”

“...I already told you, this is what I do.”

The man held out his business card to me again.

.....

I took it, reluctantly.

AZAMI NEWSPAPER - REPORTER - FRANK

I see. So he’s a newspaper journalist, apparently.

“Sorry, but an interview is a little...”

Of course, I turned and fled.

“No, no, no! Just wait a second! Will you just listen to what I have to say? Please? I’m begging you!”

“Eh.....”

Sounds like a pain...

"I'll pay you for your time!"

...and suddenly I feel up to it!

I skidded to a sudden halt. "What exactly would you like to know?"

"So greedy..." The astonished newspaper journalist took out a pen. "Anyway, you're visiting from another city, right? What do you think the results of the upcoming election will be?"

I was wondering why on earth he had gone out of his way to speak with a foreigner like me, but it's just an ordinary interview about the election. I feel like there are lots of people in that crowd more qualified to answer this question than I, but... More than likely, he wants to hear an unbiased opinion from an outsider. I bet it's one of those circumstances, huh?

"...I'm not particularly backing either one of them, so I can't say much, but..." After looking back and forth between the two people who were this very minute delivering speeches, I answered, "Right now, you could probably say that they're evenly matched, don't you think? I wouldn't be surprised if either of them won."

"Oh-hoh! And why do you think that's the case?"

"For starters," I said, "when young Matthew was delivering his speech, he frequently mentioned his relationship with his wife, right? That seems to have won over the younger crowd."

Previously, a rival politician had brought to light that Matthew was having an affair, and he had been forced to retire from politics as a result. Later, though, he had owned up to his indiscretion and apologized to his wife, and over time their relationship recovered. Now, with the support of his wife, he had apparently been able to make a comeback in this election. I had to admit, it was a good story, if a bit pedestrian. Of course, the only reason I remembered it now was because I'd heard it numerous times from campaign advertisements.

"On the other hand, the other candidate in the running, Bernard, has been a politician for a long time, and clearly takes pride in his distinguished career. Actually, the people surrounding him are all elderly. Looks like he's winning

over the older crowd.”

“What do you think about each of their political policies?”

“I don’t really care.”

“How awful...”

“Isn’t an election just a glorified popularity contest, after all?”

“Truly awful.....”

The young politician who had overcome personal tribulations to get ahead in the world, versus the veteran politician who was standing in his way... It was a familiar narrative.

I’m not surprised that everyone is so invested in the outcome.

“But you see,” the reporter Frank volunteered, “as far as we older folks are concerned, when it comes to choosing one of them, we’d prefer to have Bernard as our president. Don’t you think it would be an embarrassment if such a naive idealist managed to win the city’s highest office? Plus, he’s an adulterer.”

“But he seems to have gotten the backing of the younger crowd.”

“Right you are, but that’s just because those young guys are charmed by his youth. What is he actually talking about when he gives his speeches? It’s just a string of sob stories, isn’t it? If a guy like that were to try to lead the people, I bet he’d do a pretty poor job.”

“.....”

“Well, that’s why the older crowd wants Bernard to win over a guy like that. But as you said, at the present stage, they’re evenly matched, no doubt about it. And that’s a problem, get it?” He tilted his head at me.

I had absolutely no idea what he was trying to say.

“...Are you possibly trying to get me to do something bad?”

I had more or less guessed. But Reporter Frank said, “No, no, nothing like that,” and waved his hand awkwardly. “What I want you to do is the right thing.”

Then, making sure only I could see, he pulled some photographs from his breast pocket, and showed them to me briefly.

He was holding several photos of me.

“It’s been three days since you came to this city, right? By the way, just how much did you make running your dirty scam those first two days?”

In his hands he had a neat collection of photographic evidence of me doing business in this city. The first photo was of me buying some crappy necklaces for dirt cheap. The second photo was of me opening a roadside stall displaying a sign that said, *MANY SAY THEY FOUND HAPPINESS THANKS TO THESE NECKLACES*. The third photo was of me selling a necklace for one gold piece.

Well, that’s awfully unexpected. Why, if someone were to look at these three unrelated photographs, it might indeed appear as though I was doing something illicit, wouldn’t it?

“You do understand what I’m trying to say, right?” Wearing a broad grin, Reporter Frank continued, “So there’s a little something I’d like to ask you to do, if you would be so kind as to come back to my newspaper office.” He turned his back on me.

“These photos came as an anonymous tip from one of the victims you fooled. I’m not particularly interested in ruining your reputation or causing you any kind of legal trouble or anything. I just want you to cooperate with me a little. To do the right thing.”

And then he said, “Well, if you won’t take our side, nothing is off the table, you know.”

I think it’s pretty safe to say he’s doing the wrong thing right now.



“The young politician Matthew has a wife named Laurie, and she’s very beautiful—really, the ideal woman.” Reporter Frank had invited me into the newspaper office and lit a cigarette as he spoke. “However, as you can tell from the fact that she chose to hitch her wagon to a third-rate politician, she can’t be all that smart. I mean, even after her husband’s scandal, she stuck around and helped clean up his mess.”

Frank handed me a number of books.

They seemed to be autobiographies, and their covers were decorated with photos of a beautiful woman.

Living as a Politician's Wife.

How to Forgive a Cheating Husband.

These and other phrases were splashed across the jackets.

"We suspect that Matthew forced Laurie to write all these books," he said, exhaling tobacco smoke.

This couple's story was all too common.

It was several years in the making.

When he was still relatively unknown, the politician Matthew began having an affair with his secretary, despite being married, and eventually a rival politician had exposed him.

The populace was quick to judge the politician over a highly personal matter, that honestly had nothing to do with politics, and steadily he lost all his supporters. Even though his future had been promising, his aspirations met an abrupt end.

In the end, Matthew practically disappeared for several years. It was no surprise. The people could never trust an adulterer. But now he had returned to public life and had risen through the political ranks until he remained as the sole challenger to the leading politician.

But just what was it that made him into the man he was now?

"Everything that's happened up till now has been a part of Matthew's strategy." Reporter Frank tapped away the thickly accumulated ash from his already short cigarette and continued. "From the start of Matthew's downfall, up to the beginning of this election year, his wife Laurie has taken an active role on the center stage, as if the two of them had changed places."

After her husband had lost his standing, the wife, Laurie, had done frequent interviews with the newspaper and other media outlets. She seemed to speak frankly about her true emotions, saying, "I can't forgive my husband," and "But

I also feel like I want to be able to trust him.” She played the faithful wife who would stick by her husband no matter what, and the way she carried herself so courageously, never showing her pain no matter how badly her husband’s actions hurt her, captured the hearts of many people.

Time passed, and Laurie exhausted every available method in order to prop her husband back up. She published autobiographies, she gave lectures, she started her own fashion line, she even opened a restaurant. It was tempting to joke that those later things were simply her own interests, but at the very least, the people seemed quite supportive of her many ventures.

And since her popularity was inevitably tied to her husband’s, she was able to rehabilitate Matthew’s image in the public eye. But the newspapers continued to remind people how dependent he was on his wife’s goodwill.

“After his infidelity was exposed, Matthew devised a way to regain the public’s goodwill. His wife was the key. Publishing those autobiographies and delivering those lectures, even opening those businesses, all of it was the wife doing as she was told.”

“Do you have any proof of that?”

In response to my question, Reporter Frank shook his head.

“I don’t have any proof. Not a bit.”

I see. So, in short, this is all just speculation?

“But,” Frank continued, “I’m asking you to help me get my hands on that proof. Journalism without evidence is nothing but fiction. And that kind of journalism is worse than useless. I think, if we can get his wife to tell the truth, we can expose Matthew’s lies.”

“...And what would you have me do?”

“You’re a witch, right? So, can’t you use a spell to make it so she can’t lie, or create some kind of magical truth serum or something?”

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

“You can’t do it?”

“That’s not what I said,” I answered flatly. “But look, even if I were to do

something like that, what's your plan if Laurie doesn't say the kind of things you're expecting?"

This guy acted like a journalist obsessed with truth and justice and doing the right thing, but it was pretty clear that he really just wanted Matthew out of the way. It would be convenient for his newspaper company if Bernard won the election, and it would mean trouble for the company if Matthew were elected. So naturally, this reporter wanted to push the idea of a scandal and see the young politician pulled down from center stage once again.

But if he went ahead with that plan, and had me cast a spell on Laurie so that she could temporarily only tell the truth, then what would he do if he wasn't able to get the incriminating information he was hoping for? I imagined that if I were to cast such a spell right here and now, I might catch a glimpse of a deep, dark relationship between Bernard and the newspaper company, straight from Reporter Frank's mouth.

"You're a witch, right?" He smiled suggestively. And then he said, "If you can make a truth serum, surely you can also make a potion to make someone lie?"

As long as it came from Laurie's mouth, that was good enough. Whether it was the truth or not didn't actually matter.

Apparently, that was the right thing to do, according to the newspaper journalist standing before me.



It was a weekday, and the café on the corner of the street looked deserted. At least, aside from me, there were almost no customers, and the small amount of noise that the faraway counter waitress was making as she tidied up some tableware echoed all the way to our booth by the window.

"I run this coffee shop, you know. Although as you can see, it's not exactly thriving. Or maybe everyone's just busy campaigning."

Three out of four seats in the booth were filled, leaving only the seat across from me empty. Next to me sat Reporter Frank. And in the seat across from him, Laurie giggled softly, gracefully covering her delicate mouth.

She was quite stunning, honestly.

“So what brings you here today?”

“Right. We wanted to ask you about your relationship with your husband Matthew,” Reporter Frank said, after shooting a glance at me. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like to ask you to tell me about the politician Matthew, from his wife’s point of view.”

“Well!” Laurie clapped her hands loudly. “That’s just wonderful! If it will help my husband in his election, I’d be very happy to cooperate!”

“Okay, that’s great. Well then.”

Reporter Frank began launching easy questions at her, pen in hand.

As far as my role went, I was just sitting there absently beside him, not doing anything in particular, and with nothing to do except listen in on the conversation taking place next to me.

I really had no idea what I was doing here.

“Thank you for waiting. Here is your coffee.”

After a short while, the waitress appeared, holding three coffees.

I must have looked unoccupied, compared to the important interview being conducted next to me. I played the part of the gracious customer and said, “Oh, put them here, please,” and collected the mugs.

And then, “Excuse me, will you take sugar?” I interrupted their interview, as politely as I could.

Reporter Frank shook his head silently. Laurie looked at me with a smile and said, “I’ll take mine with one sugar, thanks.”

With nothing much to do, I had taken up little tasks like this.

It was only fitting, since so far, I hadn’t been called upon to do much of anything.

But my real duties would begin soon.

I dropped a single white lump into her coffee cup with an exaggerated *plop!* then stirred the hot liquid with a spoon. I was extremely thorough with the stirring. As if I was really getting to know that cup of coffee.

“Here you go.”

Laurie took the cup that I passed to her without suspicion, said, “Thank you,” and smiled at me.

She doesn't seem two-faced at all, though.

“.....”

But the reality was that we were all about to find out just what sorts of dark secrets she might be harboring.

She had no idea what I had really added to her coffee.

“Let's see. All right, I've got one more question,” Reporter Frank said, after Laurie had set her cup back down. “It's about your relationship with your husband. Would you say that the two of you have an equal partnership?”

The final question struck right at the heart of the matter.

Were the rumors just rumors, or were they true? Did Matthew wear the white hat, or the black?

If Laurie still possessed the ability to think normally at this point, she was certain to answer, “Yes, we're equal,” with a smile.

“.....” But there was no smile on her face now. “...No. We've never been equal...not since the start.”

She answered the question weakly, as if in a kind of trance.

“You're not equal? And what might you mean by that?” Reporter Frank tilted his head and made a puzzled expression.

How transparent can you be? Even though the truth is spilling from Laurie's mouth, thanks to my intervention.

“.....”

I watched the two of them carefully.

Laurie was now speaking the full truth about anything and everything. No matter what kind of question she was asked, she answered in detail, without shame or forethought.

And just in case she didn't say what Reporter Frank was expecting, even under my spell, we had a plan to order another round of coffee shortly and dose her with a different potion.

Ultimately, one way or another, she would have to speak the truth that the reporter was hunting for.

"For a long time...between me and Matthew, there has been a clear...master-servant relationship..."

But there was no need to order a new coffee. Because every word she said was more than meeting Frank's expectations.

"The two of us...have a master-slave contract...disguised as a marriage... There is absolutely...no room for disagreement..."

"What did you say? What does that mean?" Reporter Frank looked surprised. Though he was obviously smiling.

"His sudden return to politics...his presidential campaign... It's all because everything...went according to plan..."

"...What are you talking about? Are you saying that from the start of the affair, everything has been part of a larger plan?"

He was no longer making any effort to mask his leading questions.

"That is correct..."

Well, she didn't seem to be trying to disguise anything either, though.

"What on earth...?!" Reporter Frank looked honestly surprised. Nevertheless, his face was all smiles. "So just to clarify, are you saying that Matthew's unprecedented presidential campaign was the result of a long and deliberate scheme? That even though the two of you pretend to be happily married, you've been his slave all along?"

Reporter Frank wasn't trying to hide anything. His unabashed pressing showed that he wanted to hear all she had to say.

And since Laurie was in a state where she told all quite indifferently, it was totally natural that she would answer this question too honestly. We were waiting for her to confirm all our suspicions.

That's what *should have happened*, but—

“...No, that's not right.” She slowly shook her head.

And then she said, “...I'm not the slave. He is.”

I daresay, that was not the answer Frank had been anticipating.



Reporter Frank had clearly not expected anything like the words that had just spilled so casually from Laurie's mouth. His suspicions concerning the truth behind Laurie and Matthew's marriage had not been entirely misplaced, though he had gotten the exact nature of their relationship precisely backward.

“Everything he has done has been to serve me. That's how it was arranged.” She spoke matter-of-factly. “Even when he committed adultery with his secretary and resigned in disgrace—all of that was done under my instruction.”

She told us that everything had been arranged from the beginning. The devoted wife would loyally support the young politician during his withdrawal from the public sphere, and when he returned to politics, he would compete in the election for leadership of the whole city. Even that development was part of the plan.

The young politician had gone up against a veteran once before, but he'd had fewer resources and no reputation to speak of. And of course, the newspapers had run many more articles about the established candidate and had mostly ignored the younger politician. He had clearly been at an overwhelming disadvantage.

Name recognition is essential to surviving in the world of politics.

So they needed to sell his name.

Because a politician with no name recognition might as well not exist. And that was true for more than politicians.

“And so, I had an idea. Rather than try to get people to notice us by doing all the ‘right’ things, we would get the world to give us all the attention we wanted *by doing the ‘wrong’ things.*”

And the method they chose for this publicity stunt was Matthew's infidelity.

They allowed their marriage to be tarnished by a cheap lie.

As expected, Matthew attracted a lot of negative attention, and was eventually shuffled out of the political world after facing a barrage of criticism. Laurie handled everything after that.

She gave lectures, she opened businesses, she continued to publicly insist that her domestic life was happy and harmonious. She did whatever she could to stay in the spotlight.

And the image of the forgiving wife, standing loyally by her miserable womanizer of a husband, quickly captured people's hearts.

As time passed, Matthew's indiscretions were completely eclipsed by Laurie's various enterprises.

That was when Matthew stepped back onto center stage, with his wife publicly supporting his presidential ambitions.

By that time, the popular impression of Matthew had already reversed one hundred and eighty degrees.

"Look, sometimes a bad person who occasionally does good things will give a more favorable impression than a good person who does one bad thing, right? All I did was make my husband play both those roles," Laurie said, wearing a smile as always.



EVIL WOMAN OF THE CENTURY? THE TERRIFYING TRUE NATURE OF MATTHEW'S WIFE LAURIE

The headline in the following day's newspaper said something like that, accompanied by a photograph of Laurie—the paper was running an article about her. Well, it's probably more accurate to say it was about him, rather than about her.

"What do you think? With this, Bernard is certain to win the election! I don't think anyone will continue supporting that loser Matthew, who's been under the spell of an evil woman the whole time."

"....."

I had been summoned to the newspaper office and was asked to look over

the piece they were writing, based on the previous day's interview. But it would be difficult to describe what they had handed to me as an actual news article.

They had printed the entire interview, every word that Laurie had said. Nothing had been held back.

"Isn't this the very definition of biased reporting?"

I glared at him while waving the crackling newsprint, but Reporter Frank just gave me an exasperated shrug.

"No? I just told the truth, exactly as it is!"

"But isn't this the same as your newspaper company supporting Bernard?"

"Well, it is, yes. But I don't think the world will see it that way."

"....."

I guess that in this city, the word "impartiality" carries less weight than wet newsprint.

And there's not the least effort to disguise it.

How outrageous.

"You have my gratitude, Miss Witch. Thanks to you, this nation's future is secure. Bernard will win the election and lead our city in the right direction."

"...Sure, no problem." I held out my hand, without looking at him.

"...? What? You want a handshake?"

Are you stupid?

"Aren't you going to hand over those secret photos of me?"

"Oh, those?" As if he had actually forgotten about them until just a moment ago, Reporter Frank began searching through his bag. "Let's see, where did those get off to...?" Finally, he came up with several black and white photos of me. "Here we are."

"Thanks." I snatched the photos away from him and stuffed them into my pocket. "So now our informal collaboration is formally dissolved, right?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Personally, I'd like you to lend me your powers for a while longer.

It's just like a witch to be able to make convenient little things like potions that make people confess their deepest secrets. Won't you come work for our newspaper?"

"You're overestimating me."

"I don't think so."

"Well, in any case, I will absolutely not be collaborating with you any further."

He snorted when I turned him down politely.

"Well, all right. If you happen to visit this city again someday, I'll ask you again anyway." And then he turned abruptly on his heel and strode back into the newspaper office.

"Whatever. See ya."

I don't think we'll be meeting again.

Allow me to tell you what happened to Matthew after that.

His wife's evil deeds were exposed in the newspaper, and he collapsed during a campaign speech. Tearfully, he apologized, saying that everything he had said up until that point—that he was able to make it so far due to the support of his wife, and everything else—had all been nonsense.

The truth was, his evil wife had tormented him and forced him to have an affair as part of a scheme to win the election.

He also revealed that they were currently moving forward with divorce proceedings.

The people were outraged, but their anger was not directed at him.

Laurie was made out to be the villain of the story. Nearly all the businesses she had opened to date were forced to close, and her books formed mountains of returns at the shops.

Before long, her divorce from Matthew was finalized, she was driven out of the house she had been living in, and she disappeared from public life.

It was the type of ending that typically awaits evil women.

On the other hand, Matthew continued his presidential campaign. Even

though he had been tormented by his wife for a long time, the feelings he had for his city had been real, he insisted.

The people were moved by how he had endured her abuse for such a long time.

“Do your best!” “Don’t give up!” Such common phrases gave him a boost.

Sure enough, Reporter Frank’s exposé on the evil woman had completely upended the election. However, his scheme had brought about exactly the opposite result from what he had intended. Since the article came out exposing Laurie, and since her and Matthew’s divorce, Matthew had become far more popular than ever before.

Despite the trauma he had experienced at the hands of his evil wife, Matthew continued to devote himself to the service of his city. The people were captivated by his sincerity.

The misdeeds of his evil wife couldn’t be held against him. The people living in the city understood that very well, even if all the newspaper companies didn’t.

For this reason, Reporter Frank had been mistaken, and his efforts to sabotage Matthew’s campaign had only strengthened it.

By the way...

I had lied to Reporter Frank.

When we went to interview Laurie at the café, that wasn’t my first time meeting her.

“...According to today’s newspaper, Matthew seems to be projected to win the election. What do you think?”

“Too predictable, how boring.”

After their divorce, she invited me to her house, and treated me to coffee.

Freshly ground, it looks like.

Stirring her steaming cup with a spoon, she smiled.

I looked at her and took a sip of coffee.

“This coffee...it’s delicious.”

“Isn’t it? I mean, it’s the same coffee we served at my café.” She drank her coffee—with one sugar—and smiled. “Tastes just like always.”

It must have had the same flavor when she was sitting across from Reporter Frank, too.

After all, the only thing I had added to her cup was ordinary sugar.



I had initially met Laurie on my first day in the city.

After wandering around aimlessly for a while, I had, by coincidence, stepped into one of the cafés she owned.

“Oh my. Would you happen to be a traveler?”

A woman suddenly sat down across from me at the window-side booth where I had taken a seat.

What is with her, coming up to me out of nowhere? It’s pretty scary!

I was on my guard when she produced a business card. “Oh, please, you can relax. I promise I’m not a suspicious person.” That was a very suspicious thing to say.

“...Huh.”

The card had a lot of dense writing on it. It seemed to say that she was the wife of some kind of businessman or politician or something.

Definitely suspicious.

Then the very suspicious woman began to tell me, completely unbidden, all about the city.

“Right now, this city is bubbling with excitement over an election. It’s coming down to a head-to-head between an influential politician and a spirited newcomer.”

But there were certain problems with the political system here, she told me. The problems rested with the newspapers. All the news companies were firmly backing Bernard, and the articles they published focused on his campaign and nothing else. The candidates did not receive equal coverage on their pages, and all the reporting was thoroughly biased, she insisted.

“If this continues, my husband’s campaign will be crushed by the newspapers. That’s why I want you to lend me your power,” she said.

“Politicians should be elected because of their positions on the issues. The people should choose an upright and honest person to lead the city. But the government is too corrupt for that to ever happen. Elections to decide the future of our city have been reduced to simple popularity contests.”

The reality was that even the speeches I had witnessed in town were merely a way to attract big crowds. People were naturally more likely to gather around popular candidates, and in this way the more attention a person could gather, the more support they continued to gain.

It reminded me of swarming insects attracted to a light.

“Won’t you lend me your power in order to get a truly upstanding politician elected?”

That’s what she said to me.

But I wasn’t going to nod my head right away and accept her proposal just like that.

After all, there was the possibility that she was lying, and I wasn’t willing to work with her until I had drawn my own conclusions.

And so, I said only, “I’ll think about it.” Then took my leave that day.

By that point, I had already been approached by several amateur photographers, caught up in the craze that was sweeping the city. As I took simple strolls around town, they’d called out to me, asking me to model for their pictures. It had happened to me frequently on my first day in the city, and again on the second day.

And whenever I agreed to have my photo taken, I took several of the pictures with me as mementos.

Then, on the second day of my stay, I visited Laurie’s café again.

“Have you decided to help me, then?” Laurie asked, with a tilt of her head.

“.....” I pulled out several of the photos that had been taken around town, as well as a short letter I had written. “I don’t know whether you’re in the right, or

whether the newspaper company is in the right, so I can't promise you my support just yet."

The straightforward missive accused me of an assortment of crimes.

"In the middle of the night tonight, stick this in the door of the newspaper office. If the journalist is someone who wants to do the right thing, he's certain to ignore this letter, or else try to expose me for all the bad things it says I've done. And if he's someone who wants to do the wrong thing, he's certain to think he's got me at a disadvantage and come threaten me. If he does that, I'll cooperate with you. If he doesn't, then I won't."

And so, on my third day in the city, I discovered that the newspaper reporter was exactly the type of person to try to do the wrong thing.

"But is it really all right? In the end, you stand to lose everything in order to get your husband elected."

Laurie's method for getting Matthew elected seemed rather desperate.

"I don't mind."

As always, she smiled as she sipped her coffee.

She had orchestrated the uproar over the affair several years earlier, and later spent a long time laying the groundwork to make her husband famous, which she would have to do if he was to have any hope of winning the election. There was no other way, except to prove his honesty.

That must have been what she was thinking.

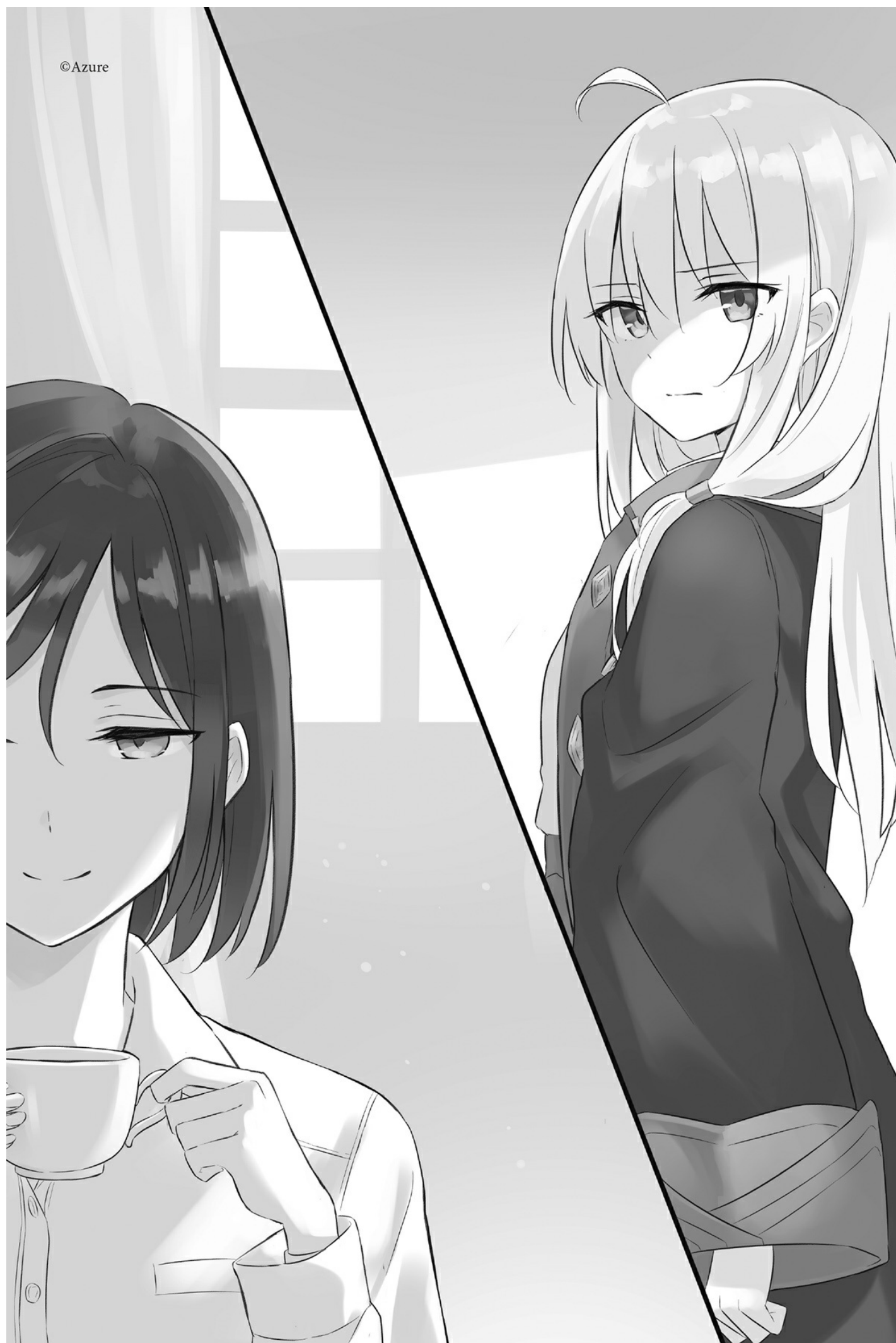
So for that reason, Laurie had forced her husband to have an affair several years earlier, and was now preparing to have that fact exposed.

By confessing that all his crimes were really her own, she could create an image of him as an honest man who kept his misguided wife by his side no matter what.

She had even come up with the scheme involving her truth serum confession—she would put on a show of revealing all her evil deeds.

"I had to do the wrong thing for the right reason," she said. "I want him to be the type of politician who will do the right thing for the right reason."

“ ”



I set my coffee cup down and looked at her. “It sounds like Matthew will do a lot of good after you cut him loose.”

Right now, his popularity knew no bounds. He seemed certain to become the next president.

“I’m sure that he will. At least, I hope so. It’s what we’ve waited so long for.”

It seemed like the city would finally have a leader dedicated to its people.

But did anyone have any idea that he had only made it so far because of his unscrupulous wife, who had been willing to do the wrong thing at the right time?

I was certain that nobody knew that fact.

Not before then, and not after.



Several days after the departure of the Ashen Witch, a new president was sworn in. He was the youngest president in the history of the city.

This was a turning point in the city’s history—claimed all the newspapers, rather shamelessly.

At the start of the election, nobody had imagined that Matthew would go up against a powerful and influential politician, armed only with his idealism and devotion to his city, and actually win.

Of course, the whole city buzzed with excitement as the new president was inaugurated. He would lead the city down a new path for sure. Everyone was convinced of it.

“Thank you.”

At a small private residence near the border, a single man bowed deeply. This man was supposed to be carrying the city on his shoulders. This man had just become the new president. And this man was perhaps more honest than anyone imagined.

After bowing for a long time, as any politician would, he rose.

His gaze met that of his ex-wife, chin resting stoically in her hands.

“Please guide me again,” he blurted out, imploringly. “What should I do next?”

At his words, the corners the woman’s mouth raised ever so slightly.

Standing there was certainly a devoted politician.

However, no one else knew that his devotion had never been directed toward his beloved city. Not a single one of his constituents understood that he had always been devoted to a certain someone.

Not before then, and not after.



CHAPTER 4

The Story of a Disease, a Witch, and a Broom

Among mages, there are those bearing the title of witch, the highest rank. But when I encounter people who are under the impression that a witch is some kind of fantastic person who can solve any problem no matter what, I can't help but shake my head.

Witches aren't perfect. We make mistakes. There are many things we can't do.

For example, we can't bring the dead back to life, and we can't stop time for the whole world, and we can't manipulate the weather with complete mastery... I mean, there are probably some witches who can, but I definitely can't. If I could, I wouldn't be stuck inside on rainy days.

Witches also can't achieve immortality. We can't be alive and dead at the same time. We can't be awake and asleep at the same time. There are all sorts of other examples, but in short, witches aren't omnipotent. (Although the things we can do are so wide-ranging that it would probably be easier to list all the things we can't do rather than the things we can.) And really, it's never bothered me that I can't do those kinds of things. Even if I could be awake and asleep at the same time, what would the point of that be?

However...

...If there just so happened to be a witch who could cure any illness, what would that be like?

By the time most people become witches, they have a good handle on spells that can heal injuries, but as for a witch who can cure any disease... Well, in all my days of traveling, I've never heard of such a person, much less seen one.

Though it would be so wonderful if she existed.

I'd very, very much like her to come to my side, and deliver me from this terrible illness. Won't anybody conveniently appear and cure me?

"...Cough."

If not, I think I might die.

Just now, I'm sure that was the icy grip of death closing around my heart. I'm suffering from a serious illness. A true matter of life and death.

As I was talking to myself like this, the ceiling that I was looking up at was warping and distorting, and I could tell that my head was spinning with fever. It felt like the flow of time had slowed to a crawl.

Did the second hand on the clock always move so slowly...?

"Are you all right, Miss Elaina?"

From beside the bed came a gentle voice that sounded very concerned for me. When I raised my head, there was a girl looking down at me with a face just like mine.

I tried to shake my head, but I was so sluggish that it was out of the question. My mouth opened and closed several times until eventually I managed to sigh, "...I'm not...okay...I think...I'm dying..."

Now, this serious illness, this grave matter of life and death that held me in its icy grasp, this source of all my suffering, what could it be?

That's right, I have a cold.



"No, no, it's just a common cold. What are you saying?"

I was looking down at Mistress Elaina, who was staring weakly up at the ceiling from her bed.

Since I was her broom and stuck close to her side every day, I also knew the reason for her current condition. Despite it being the middle of winter, she had opened all the windows in her room before hopping into bed, saying, "Today I feel like enjoying the cool air." That was where she messed up. You see, occasionally, Miss Elaina can be something of a hopeless moron.

"Oh...I'm certain that I've caught some awful, local disease... I'm sure my time is almost up... Just go, my beloved broom. I don't think I'm going to recover... Death comes for me..."

My owner was obviously physically and mentally exhausted by her illness.

Either that, or her questionable life choices were finally catching up to her in her hour of weakness.

“It’s all right, Mistress Elaina. I’m sure you’ll be at peace soon.”

“You’re right...because I’m going to die like this...”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

“Hmm...? Euthanasia...then...?”

“That’s also not what I mean.”

She had gone right past acceptance, straight to abject surrender.

You’re not going to die from a simple cold!

But the only reason I was able to have a conversation with Mistress Elaina like this was because she had cast a spell that had me assume human form.

I recalled her summoning me while being ravaged by the brunt of her illness.

“Medicine... Please...go buy me some medicine...,” she had begged me.

“.....Um, I would like to go and buy you some medicine, but...”

“No...you can’t.”

She wasn’t acting like the mistress Elaina I knew. She’d grabbed hold of my skirt and refused to let go. She’d waited so long to summon me that she’d gone delirious, and instead of sending me to fetch medicine, now she begged me not to leave her side.

When I’d taken human form, Elaina had been collapsed on the floor, so I quickly moved her to the bed, but...

“...Don’t go, please...” Before I could leave to buy medication, Elaina looked at me with bleary eyes. “Listen...if I’m left alone like this, I’ll die... I’ll bite off my tongue and swallow it and die, are you all right with that?”

“Do you even have the energy to bite your tongue off?”

“Yeth.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yeth, ah do.”

“I can see you trying, and you clearly don’t.”

“Please don’t leave me.”

And so we went around in circles.

“But if I don’t go, you won’t get better, Mistress Elaina.” I hardened my heart, shook Elaina’s hand off, and stood up.

“Ah...”

If I were to describe Mistress Elaina’s expression at that time, I would say that she looked as pitiful as a puppy abandoned by the roadside, tired and sad beyond description. She looked like she might burst into tears at any moment. I was surprised to find myself choking up a bit. The sight of her hurt my heart a little.

“...Well then, I shall stay by your side and read you a book until you fall asleep, Mistress Elaina. How does that sound?”

I hoped the compromise would get Elaina to agree that I had to leave her alone to fetch the medicine she needed.

At my suggestion, Elaina seemed slightly relieved.

“In that case...I understand... All right, please return before I wake up...okay?”

“.....”

How is it that I want to protect her one moment and slap her the next?

I cleared my throat loudly, shaking off those brutish thoughts, and took a seat at the end of Mistress Elaina’s bed.

The book that I opened was *The Adventures of Niche*, the copy that Mistress Elaina carried around with her.

She’s read this one many times before, so she should get tired of it and fall asleep quickly.



“Um... Once upon a time, in a certain place, a witch—”

“Zzz...”

She was asleep.

Five seconds after I started reading, Mistress Elaina had passed out.

“.....”

I quickly left the room, thinking many things I would rather not say.



I recalled that Mistress Elaina had arrived here several days ago, and apparently since the time of her arrival, a plague had been running rampant throughout the city.

Under a cloudy sky, the city was dark and gloomy, and all the people walking down the streets looked powerless, as if the life force had been drained from their bodies. They shuffled around like living corpses.

Rather than lively conversation, it was more common to hear sneezes or coughs when you passed them by. It seemed like every person I encountered was somehow sick, and it felt like it was only a matter of time before I was infected. Though that was really just in my head. I am an object, after all, so I don't actually have to worry about getting sick.

“Let's see... I suppose I first have to find a drugstore...”

I didn't know this city, but I was confident I would somehow eventually find what I was looking for as long as I kept moving. On an impulse, I started down a particular street, and discovered that the drugstore was surprisingly close to our hotel.

It's close enough that Mistress Elaina could have come here herself, right?

However—

“Hey, what happened to you?!”

“Hurry up and give us some medicine!”

“My child is suffering from this illness! Do something, quick!”

“If the drugstore won’t sell us any medicine, who can we turn to?!”

“Hurry up and come out!”

A crowd of people had gathered in front of the store, driven by the epidemic running rampant through the city. The swarm of frightened people threatened to engulf the shop. Angry shouts rose from the crowd, and a chorus of booing broke out.

What in the world is going on here?

“Hee-hee-hee... This has turned into quite a serious situation, hasn’t it?” An old woman suddenly appeared beside me, watching the crowd from outside with a know-it-all look. “Good grief,” she said, and shrugged, “you know, in this city...right now, there’s a terrible plague going around.”

“Uh-huh...”

I can see that.

“The girl who owns this shop always makes such wonderful medicines to stave off the plague. But you know what? Recently, she’s stopped making any medicine at all.”

“Is that so...?”

Well, I kind of gathered that, but...

“So now the city is in an awful state. No one who’s caught the sickness is recovering. That’s what’s causing all the commotion in front of the drugstore. If you ask me, it’s a real problem. Hee-hee-hee...”

“.....”

Then, after she’d laboriously explained many things I’d already figured out just by paying attention to the state of the town, the old woman left.

I wonder what she was hoping to achieve...?

It occurred to me that actually, if the people standing in front of the drugstore had enough energy to form a mob, they would probably get better with a little rest, no medication needed. Regardless, it didn’t seem like I was going to get what I came for.

I was in a bind. Judging by the crowd that had formed here, the owner of this shop was probably the only one who was able to make a medicine to combat the illness that was afflicting Mistress Elaina.

.....

Wait, that means...

To put it another way, if the owner of this shop would just make some medicine, Mistress Elaina could get back to her usual healthy self.

All right, for now, let's go meet this drugstore owner.

"Don't close yourself up in there! Come out!"

"Yeah, that's right!"

"Sell us the medicine!"

I pushed my way through the crowd and stealthily went around to the back of the store. See, thanks to being an object, I pick up on things that regular people don't notice. For example, the separate entrance on the back side of the shop.

"...There it is."

And sure enough, there it was.

"Heh-heh-heh...looks like you found me somehow."

There stood the back door, taunting me.

"But do you suppose you'll be able to pick my lock? It's very strong, you know."

I wasn't sure why, but the door's subtly provocative attitude made me angry.

Ignoring what the door had said, I found a bit of scrap wire lying in the street nearby.

And then I applied it to the lock.

See, thanks to being an object, lockpicking is one of my specialties.

"Psh...my defenses are solid! I've only ever offered it up to one key in all my life! You won't open me that easily!"

Clink, clink.

“Don’t do that! I can’t open for a wire!”

I quickly turned the handle. The door unlocked smoothly.

What a weak lock that was.

“W-wait, please! What... What are you planning to do with me?”

I opened the door.

“Aah...you can’t... Stop that, please... I’m so embarrassed...”

I closed the door.

“Thank you!”

After I made it through the weird door, a gloomy room spread out before me.

From the moment I entered, I had noticed the smell of chemicals, a smell particular to a drugstore. The pungent aroma permeated the room, and I couldn’t help but grimace.

The space was in terrible disarray, and all sorts of objects within were crying. The papers scattered over the floor. The vials that looked like they had been discarded halfway through being mixed. The abandoned ingredients. The room was filled with antique furniture, but every surface was covered with clutter. I felt like I was in a hoarder’s house.

In every direction, I could hear the mournful cries of all the objects, lamenting their cruel fates. They were all cursing at the lady of the house, who was crouched in the middle of the room.

“Hey, don’t abandon uuuus!”

“Oh, I’ve been lying on the floor so looong!”

“You can’t treat us this waaay, you awful human!”

And so on. They were just like the townspeople outside.

“.....”

Of course, the owner couldn’t hear what they were saying. Because they were objects.

“Boo-hoo-hoo...it’s all over...”

Wait, maybe they were getting through to her somehow. The girl who owned the shop was wearing a white chemist's coat and had blond hair. She seemed like she was usually very beautiful, but...her eyes were hollow and her face was pale. She looked like she had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.

"I can't keep this up... I just don't care about anything anymore..."

She was muttering like the world was ending.

"Hey, don't give up hooope!"

"Waaait, you've gotta hold on!"

"You can't treat yourself this waaay, you awful human!"

The objects tried to encourage her. Though of course she couldn't hear their voices.

"Umm...are you all right...?"

I knelt in front of the girl. I couldn't help but feel pity for her.

She looked up, but didn't seem especially surprised by me, even though I had suddenly trespassed into her room. "P-please...", she said, bowing. "Won't you please help me...?"

I didn't know what to say.

What are you talking about?

"What happened here...?" I asked.

"I'm totally done for!" the girl exclaimed. "I can't make any damn medicine! I can't do it, gimme a break!" Her cheeks were wet with tears. She was obviously scared and desperate.

"Um... It seems like a lot of people will suffer without your medicine, though..."

"What do you know, you jerk?! You ever think that maybe I'm sick, too?! I don't have time to be making medicine!"

"Goodness, you're sick?" *That is awful*, I thought. "What illness are you suffering from?"

“Lovesickness!”

“...What?”

“Love! Sickness!”

Ah, so you're perfectly healthy.

The pharmacist whose name I didn't know ignored my astonishment and started telling me about her circumstances.

“The truth is that recently, there's been this guy who's been getting friendly with me. I also have feelings for him, actually. I was really starting to like him, but...earlier, he gave me a necklace. It has a gem embedded in it, and it's really beautiful, but when I looked it up, it turned out to be the stone that symbolizes ‘friendship’ in gemstone language, you see? He wants to be friends with me. Not date me. Not marry me. Friends with benefits is all he's after! That's what this stone means! Have you ever heard of such a cruel betrayal?! No, you never have! Damn it all!”

“...Huh.”

She threw the necklace down in a fit of tears. But several seconds later she said, “But...but I can't hate him! I love him!” and picked it right back up. The girl was obviously emotionally unstable.

But it was clear that unless I did something about this lovesickness, she wouldn't make me any medicine.

If this girl doesn't cheer up, Mistress Elaina won't return to normal. That's a problem. I must do something to get Miss Pharmacist to make the medication.

I had half a mind to go join the angry mob outside if the girl didn't start cooperating soon.

“Um, can I ask you a different, but related, question?”

“What is it?!”

“...If your lovesickness was...cured... Would you make medicine for us then?”

“Of course! But that's impossible! Augh!” She sulkily threw herself on the ground. “I can't do it!”

I ought to be the one throwing a tantrum right now, but...

No one would be cured if I didn't do this. There was no other way.

"Well then, allow me to solve your problem for you." I placed a hand on her shoulder. "By the way, do you know the saying, 'Sickness starts with the mind'?"

"I do. But why bring that up all of a sudden?"

"No reason. I just wanted to feel like I had said something clever."

For now, I need to start by searching for the man she loves.



Necklace in hand, I left the pharmacist at her house.

I was headed out to find her beloved.

"Which direction should I go to reach the man's house?"

I dangled the necklace from my hand.

Since I am an object, communicating with the necklace was no trouble.

"Go three blocks farther, then make a right and you'll be at the man's house, yes!"

"Is that the truth?"

"The truth, yes!"

This necklace was quite the travel guide.

Following its instruction, I proceeded ahead three more blocks, then turned, and when I did, sure enough, there was the man's house. Well, since I hadn't known where it was to begin with, all I could confirm was that there was indeed a house. For further confirmation, the necklace cried out, "We're here!"

To be honest, what the necklace said was, "Here, yes!"

We were standing in front of a completely unremarkable home. But since the necklace had said it, there could be no doubt that this was where the man lived.

"Excuse me!"

I rang the doorbell.

And waited.

But there was no answer.

“Excuse me!”

This time I knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

We had no time to wait.

There was no helping it.

“W-wait...! What do you plan on doing with that?” *Clink, clink.* “D-don’t! I’ll get messed up if you put a wire in me!”

I picked the lock and went inside.

“...Boo-hoo-hoo... I’m completely...hopeless...”

Inside, a man was crouched on the floor. His vacant eyes, devoid of vitality, were staring intently at a single point on the wall, “Ah...I, too, want to become a stain on a wall...” He had clearly given up on life.

Well then...

...I wonder what’s wrong with him.

“My heart...is broken...”

The man, who seemed neither surprised nor alarmed by my sudden intrusion into his home, looked like the most exhausted person on earth. He had heavy bags under his eyes, and it was clear that something was tormenting him to the point of insomnia.

“Aah...I guess you probably came to steal my stuff... Well, take whatever you want and go... I really don’t care...”

I was pretty sure I knew what was going on.

The man let out another lifeless sigh. “The truth is...a while ago, I gave a necklace to a girl I liked...and then...ever since...she’s been shut up in her room... She even stopped doing her job at the pharmacy... That’s right...she must have been so grossed out to receive a necklace from a disgusting guy like me...”

The man looked about ready to keel over.

“Um...are you all right...?”

He was so haggard that I think even if I had been an ordinary burglar, I might still have been concerned for him.

“I can’t go on...”

“Um, please cheer up...? You look just fine! Very handsome!” I put a hand on his shoulder.

“Stop it! Don’t be nice to me! You’re gonna make me cry! I might fall in love with you!”

“Umm, okay, when I said that you look handsome, I was just paying you a compliment, you know? My heart isn’t exactly pounding over here, so don’t get the wrong idea.”

“...Isn’t that a little harsh?”

“It’s appropriately firm.”

“.....”

“By the way, the necklace you said you gave to a girl... Is it this one?”

I held up the necklace so he could see.

“Th-that’s...!” The look in the man’s eyes changed. “Why do you have it...? Ah...I see... She threw it away, huh...? Because I’m so disgusting...”

I’m getting really tired of this!

“Wrong. I had a little something to discuss with you, so I borrowed it.” And then, I said, “Do you know the meaning behind this necklace?”

“.....?” He frowned and tilted his head. “The meaning...? No, I just bought it because I thought it was pretty...”

“.....”

He hadn’t realized that the stone indicated “friendship” in the language of gemstones.

So that’s what happened.

Of course, I realized that from the very beginning.

Because the necklace told me so.

“This man picked me out, saying ‘I think this will look good on her,’ yes!”

It goes without saying that I had seen this ending coming from the very beginning.

In other words, to make a long story short, this is what had happened. These two people were, without a doubt, in love. So in love, in fact, that they were each blind to the other’s intentions.

And there’s also the matter of sickness starting with the mind.



“Here you go. Please, take your medicine.”

“I hate medicine. Especially powdered medicine.”

Mistress Elaina turned her face away from the medication I was presenting to her.

Are you a child? Are you really being a baby about this?

“Don’t be so stubborn. If you don’t take this, you won’t get better.”

“I. Don’t. Like. It.”

“All right, will you stay sick forever?”

“I. Don’t. Want. To!”

“Well then, take your medicine, please.”

“No!”

Mistress Elaina turned away, shaking her head.

Seriously, what on earth is this? You told me to go buy medicine, and now that I’ve bought it and brought it back to you, you’re rejecting it? Has the fever made you crazy? Is that what’s going on?

“Just take the medicine!”

“No!”

We continued to argue back and forth, until finally I forced the medicine down Mistress Elaina's throat.

"Bleeeh..."

Then she started to cry.

I was crying, too. I never wanted to see Mistress Elaina in such an awful state. I would not be able to get the thought of her like this out of my mind.

"By the way, Mistress Elaina, I will soon revert to my original form, but—"

"You can't! Please don't go..."

"...Well then, I'm going to read your book to you again, so...won't you please forgive me?"

"I don't under— Zzz..."

"Once upon a time, in a certain—huh...? That was fast..."

And so the curtain fell on my own little adventure.

After that, I stroked Mistress Elaina's hair as she slept, and, taking a bit of a liberty, I decided to record my story. I felt it was only right, after all my hard work. When Mistress Elaina wakes up, once again in good health, and reads what I've written in her journal, I'm sure she'll laugh and forgive me. I think.



When I opened my eyes, my fever was gone, and my mind was clear. I recalled the trouble I'd caused when the fever had come on, and how I hadn't been myself.

My broom was leaning against the side of the bed. It looked just like it had fallen asleep while watching over me as I slept.

Next to the broom sat one volume of my diary. Recorded there, in neat handwriting remarkably similar to my own, was a thorough report on everything that had happened while I was asleep.

.....

I thought I could feel my fever returning as I scanned the pages.

Ahhh, I can't believe I acted like that... I wanna die...

But even when I was at my worst, no matter what terrible things I said, my loyal broom stuck by me. I knew that whenever I needed her, she would be there for me. And I also knew how much I depended on her.

I picked up the broom from where it was leaning against the bed and set it on top of my lap.

And then, I stroked the brush end of the broom. It was stiff and coarse and not even a little nice to touch.

“I’ll be depending on you whenever I’m in trouble, so please look after me, okay?”

My voice echoed around the room, then faded into silence.

I’m sure this won’t be the last time I mess things up and have to summon you to save me, but...

...When that time comes, please forgive me with a smile, okay?



CHAPTER 5

The Cursed Servant

Two neighboring cities were separated by a forest. The people called it the Wandering Wood, and they loathed it.

Unless they had a very good reason, the people refused to enter the forest, and even the trade routes that joined the two cities circled all the way around to avoid it. Of course, the fastest way to get from one city to another was to cut through the Wandering Wood, and unfortunately, sometimes extraordinary circumstances gave someone enough reason to enter that dreaded forest.

The Wandering Wood.

A treacherous forest that one did not enter without reason.

In the middle of that forest was a lone witch.

She wore a black robe and triangular hat. She was a witch and also a traveler.

She surveyed the forest with her lapis-colored eyes as her ashen hair fluttered in the breeze. Not much light made it down from the sky through the thick canopy of leaves, and moss grew on the trunks of the trees that she passed. Whenever she took a step forward, the ground would yield softly underfoot, and she would grimace at the sensation.

By the way...

Before she entered the forest, a soldier from a nearby city had tried to warn the witch.

"Huh? A shortcut?" he had said. "Don't even think about it! You're sure to get lost!"

But the witch had brushed off his warning with baffling confidence. "I'll be fine," she had insisted. "I'm telling you, I've encountered this sort of thing many times before."

That witch, who ultimately ended up exactly as the soldier had said she would... Who could she be?

That's right, it's me.

And I'm lost.

"I can't do this anymore!"

It had been nearly an hour since I first started walking through the forest, and I was convinced that I had been going in circles the whole time.

I walked and I walked, but I never reached the edge of the forest.

Just how much farther do I have to go? Am I even making any progress? Am I really just going around and around in the same spot?

I continued walking past the monotonous scenery, clearly making zero progress. Before long, exhaustion, boredom, and loneliness began to overtake me. I was utterly fed up with this stupid forest.

And then, at last, the landscape showed me something different.

"....."

Farther ahead, I saw a girl, facing away from me. Her hair was dark blue, almost black. It fell smoothly just past her shoulders. She wore a black dress, darker than her hair. Her long skirt didn't have a speck of mud on it. It was immaculate.

She was holding a basket in one hand as she hunched over to collect things to put inside it. She looked like she was out gathering edible wild plants in the local wood. The girl hummed cheerfully as she worked, and her carefree demeanor seemed out of place in the spooky forest.

I wonder if she lives here in the forest.

"Umm..."

Without giving it much thought, I called out to her.

Immediately after I did—

"Hyaaah!" She looked at me with a very, very surprised expression, and in her panic, she lost her footing. "Ah, ahhh, ahhh...!" The girl lost hold of her basket and it flipped over, dumping a huge pile of mushrooms right on her head.

I see, it seems she was gathering mushrooms. Eww, mushrooms...

“Wh-who goes there?!”

“Um, I’m a traveler... My name is Elaina.” I extended a hand to the girl. “Are you all right?”

She looked at my hand, looked at my face, finally realized that she was in an unseemly state, then after panicking again and frantically stuffing the mushrooms back into her basket, she took my hand.

“Thank you very much...”

She gripped my hand tightly and stood. I only realized now that we were standing a bit closer that she was a little taller than I.

“Ah. My name is Eustia. What did you come here for, Elaina?”

“.....” I averted my gaze. “Actually, I’m just taking a shortcut from one city to another.”

“Ah. So you’re lost?” Eustia clapped her hands.

“...No, no. You’ve got it all wrong, I’m definitely not lost. I’m just...passing through the forest, as a shortcut to get from one city to the other.”

“Oh? But this place is quite deep in the forest, you know? In the time it took you to get here, you could have gone around faster by the detour that avoids the forest.”

“.....”

“Are you lost?”

“...Okay, fine! I’m lost. What of it?” With the evidence stacked against me, I started to sulk.

But Eustia wasn’t bothered by my disgruntled expression and clapped her hands again. “In that case, shall I show you the way? This forest can be pretty confusing, so it’s rather difficult to find your way out alone.” Her carefree attitude seemed out of place in the dark wood.

“I would be...very grateful...yes.”

I nodded as I reluctantly owned up to my own mistake, and immediately after I did—



“Gurgururu!”

—a weird sound echoed through the trees. I looked around, thinking it was the cry of some unfamiliar beast, but I quickly realized that the noise had come from somewhere near my stomach. It sounded like I had a wild animal in my belly.

How rude!

Eustia smiled back at me in my astonishment.

“Before I show you the way out, how about we get something to eat?”

Eustia told me all sorts of things on the way to her house. Apparently, she lived in the deep forest where other people rarely ventured.

I had to imagine that living in a place like this had not been her choice, but Eustia only said, “Home is where you make it.”

Who’d wanna live in a house full of mushrooms?

Her home was not all that far from where she had been foraging, and we arrived in only a few minutes. The house sat in the middle of a small clearing; it looked like the gnarled trees were avoiding the spot.

The house was built entirely of wood; roof, walls, doors, and all, and it seemed like it belonged to the forest somehow. If it weren’t for the sunlight pouring into the clearing, it would have blended right in. I could see laundry hanging on a line to dry. The place felt lived-in.

Next to the house was somebody’s grave. I couldn’t see the name. But from the freshness of the overturned earth, I could tell that whoever was buried there had passed on only recently.

In the yard, a man was splitting firewood. The way he swung the ax down vigorously over and over again was exhilarating.

Before long, the man noticed the two of us and turned to face us.

“Ah. Welcome home, Eustia...And who is our guest?”

He was a fine young man. He appeared to be in his mid-twenties. He tilted his head, still looking at me.

Eustia trotted over to the man, and said, “I just got back, Master!” She embraced him. “This is Elaina. She’s a wayward witch.”

That title doesn’t quite do me justice.

But that was all Eustia offered by way of explanation.

“Ah...” The man nodded. “Well, it is quite easy to lose your way in the forest, eh? I suppose if you brought her here, you’re planning to feed her, right, Eustia? Well, you’d better get started, then.”

He urged Eustia into the house.

Then, to me he said, “It will take a little time before the meal is ready. If you don’t mind, would you please come into the living room and tell me about yourself? As you can see, it’s very rare for the two of us to meet people from the outside.”

I nodded.

“Thank you... Oh, I forgot to say, my name is Giulio. Nice to meet you, Miss Wayward Witch.”

“It’s Elaina.”

I refuse to let that disgraceful designation stick.

“Wow. So that’s how you got lost, huh? I suppose you must be pretty careless, as travelers go.”

“How rude. I’ll have you know this was the rare exception.”

A warm, inviting air filled the living room, where a fire had been lit in the hearth. Eustia was diligently cooking in the kitchen, while Giulio kept me company.

I felt a little like I was intruding on the life of a happy couple.

Though I knew that the two of them probably didn’t have that kind of relationship.

Because Eustia had called Giulio “*Master*.”

“Why are you living in the middle of a forest like this?” I tilted my head questioningly,

Giulio nodded calmly. “Ah, well, it’s because it’s better for us to live here,” he answered vaguely.

“Meaning what?”

“This place is called the Wandering Wood, and causes people to get lost, right? Locals don’t enter without a good reason, and any foreigners who try are usually turned away. Because they always get lost.”

“...Right.” I averted my eyes, recalling the face of the soldier who had tried rather earnestly to warn me away from taking a shortcut.

“We’re retired from the world. It’s best that we don’t meet outsiders too often.”

“...I’m pretty sure I’m an outsider, though.”

“You’re the exception, because Eustia brought you here,” he said. “Plus, occasionally even we feel like talking to someone from the outside.”

Aren’t you contradicting yourself?

I didn’t feel like asking.

Because there was something more intriguing on my mind.

“...Does the reason you avoid outsiders have anything to do with that grave in your backyard?”

Beneath the table, I had stealthily drawn my wand.

Giulio seemed to immediately perceive the slight wariness in my tone of voice. With a smile, he said, “I suppose you’re wondering if we killed the previous tenant?”

“.....”

“We didn’t. That’s not what’s going on. Go ahead and relax. That is indeed a grave out back, but you see”—his voice was low, almost confessional—“that’s the grave of an evil person.”



And then he told me the tale of Eustia’s life.

Long ago, when Eustia was still young, she had been sold into slavery. Giulio

didn't know exactly why, though of course it hadn't been her choice.

In her earliest memories, Eustia could recall her mother holding her tenderly, though she could not picture the surroundings. Then, something must have happened. Eustia was separated from her mother and became a slave.

The first time she was purchased was when she was about five years old. A nouveau riche man, a merchant, took a liking to her appearance, and bought her. But about half a year later, she was returned to the slave trader. The wealthy merchant had died under suspicious circumstances.

The next person to purchase her was an aristocrat. He bought her to serve him as a maid. Apparently, she had spent several years with him, but when the aristocrat's son, who had taken quite a liking to Eustia, also died under mysterious circumstances, the girl was once again returned to the slave trader.

After that, she was moved many times from one wealthy house to another. But for some reason, wherever she went, unnatural deaths followed. It might be the person who purchased her, or his son, or someone who did business with them. It varied, but eventually she was always returned to the slave trader.

It was like she was cursed.

Before long, she developed a reputation as an angel of death. There was no one who wanted to buy her.

When she was coming up on her fifteenth birthday, a certain young man fell in love with her at first sight and bought her on the spot.

That young man was Giulio.

From the first moment he saw her, he was completely taken by her, from the bottom of his heart. He wondered how on earth she hadn't been purchased, as lovely as she was. Though he was puzzled, he took her back home with him.

Though he certainly fancied the girl, Giulio had a more practical reason for purchasing her. As a mercenary for hire, he had spent his life wandering through foreign lands. He knew nothing of housework or cooking. So he'd thought to purchase a servant to take care of his daily necessities. And since he was always moving from city to city, Giulio couldn't form close relationships with people, so he was probably also lonely.

Eustia was a very hard worker. She quietly obeyed his every instruction, and devoted herself to her master Giulio, just like a good servant. Not much time had passed before Giulio was utterly charmed not just by Eustia's beauty, but by her deeply earnest character.

He spent his days devising plans to win her heart. She had clearly stolen his.

"Eustia. Come here." One day, Giulio called her to him while she was in the middle of her work, and said, "Thank you for all your hard work. Umm, if you like...here."

In his hand was a bouquet of flowers. He had thought they would make her happy.

But the two of them had lived in very different worlds. They did not see things the same way.

"I suppose you want me to decorate the house with these, Master?"

At the time, Eustia had cocked her head, with the same earnest expression as always.

"Huh? No...um, they were meant to be a present..."

"A present? Why would a master give a present to his slave?"

"....."

".....?"

Giulio gave her presents many times after that as well, but each time, she would just look puzzled. Never once did she seem pleased.

Giulio was baffled. She still didn't see him as anything more than another owner.

It seemed he wouldn't be able to win her with gifts. So, what did she want? It wasn't clear to him.

"Eustia, is there anything that you desire? A thing that you'd like to have, or something you want for yourself in the future?"

She looked at him with eyes devoid of life, and answered, "There is not."

Her reply was direct, and very cold.

“There is nothing for me.”

That was when he had a realization.

The girl he knew was an empty shell. Her whole life she had been treated like a doll that was only good for following orders.

So, Giulio gave up on trying to please her with gifts, because she would never be truly happy until she had filled the emptiness inside her.

After that, he took her with him to all sorts of places.

They went traveling together. They went shopping together. They went to the theater together. They holed up in the library together. He taught her a bit of swordplay, as a way to protect herself. The two of them spent nearly every day together pursuing different interests.

Before long, Eustia had filled the emptiness inside her with learning and culture. She had become the radiant young woman that I had met that day in the forest.

“Eustia. Come here.” One day, Giulio called her to him while she was in the middle of her work, and said, “Thank you for all your hard work. Umm, if you like...here.”

In his hand was a bouquet of flowers. He had thought they would make her happy.

“Thank you very much...Master.”

Her smile when she accepted the bouquet was very, very beautiful, he told me.

At last they were ready to leave their master-servant relationship behind and start a new life as sweethearts.

However...

“But even after that point, we weren’t able to take our relationship any further. You see, I couldn’t touch her. She wouldn’t even let me try. We were never able to be truly happy.”

What on earth do you mean by that?

I tilted my head in confusion.

“It’s because she was cursed,” he said.

I still couldn’t grasp what on earth he meant.

“I’ll tell her the rest of that story, Master.”

That’s when plates of food began appearing on the table with a clatter. Apparently, we had been talking for some time. Long enough for Eustia to finish cooking.

“But before we continue, please eat. It would be a shame to let it get cold.”

Eustia wore a sweet smile.



After the meal, Eustia cleaned up, then set three cups of tea on the table, and said with a hint of embarrassment, “...If it’s all right, I’d like to tell you the rest of the story myself.”

“Giulio told me that you’re no ordinary servant, but...” I bowed slightly, thanking her for the tea, and took a sip.

“Right. I’m not an ordinary servant. I mean, usually, a slave would never live such a happy life, right?”

“.....”

“.....And that’s not all. I think you’ll be able to guess, more or less, now that you’ve heard about my early life. But...,” she said matter-of-factly, “I’m a wicked slave who has brought death upon every master I’ve ever had.”

Her whole life, she had gone from master to master, through all sorts of hands. One time, it was her master who died; another time, it was the master’s son... Without fail, death followed the girl, and again and again she wound up back with the slave trader, and the cycle would continue.

Eustia hadn’t intentionally killed anyone, of course. She didn’t have the strength to do it, nor the constitution. Ever since she was born, this girl had lived her whole life as an ideal servant.

When the first man to purchase her had wound up dead, she had felt relief deep in her heart. Her first master had been the type to lay hands on his

servants. He had died right after attacking her.

The next man to buy her hadn't been so bad, but his son had taken a liking to her. The boy had died after trying to force himself on her.

Again and again, men sought to take advantage of the vulnerable servant girl, and every one of them met an early end, and she would wind up back with the slave trader.

Eustia had realized that there was something strange inside her.

"I'd had some sort of curse put on me. It was almost like I was poisonous."

Contact with her skin was relatively harmless; the poison, she said, was in her body fluids, like saliva and sweat, among others.

"A man who stole a kiss from me dropped dead on the spot. Men who have tried to...assault me have met the same fate. Every one of them who touched my body died soon after. That's why I'm no ordinary servant," she said.

"...How did you come to be like that?"

"It's a tale from long ago," Eustia answered. "I had only just been sold into servitude. A dirty, bedraggled old witch came to the slave market."

Eustia hadn't gotten a look at the witch beneath her heavy cowl, but she remembered quite clearly what the woman did to her.

The witch had extended her wand toward the girl's cage. Then she touched the girl's face and said this: *"It is my will that you shall never be owned by another. So shall it be!"*

Eustia hadn't had any idea what those words were supposed to mean. She just remembered feeling very puzzled by the witch's gentle smile as she touched her.

Even when the slave trader sold her like so much merchandise, those words were always on her mind.

And when the men who bought her started dying, one after another, she knew.

"In order for that shabby-looking witch to get her hands on me... She must

have placed a curse on me when she touched me, so that I couldn't be taken by any other master. And so, I ended up back with the slave trader many times.”

“.....”

“Well, some time after Master Giulio purchased me, I caught wind of a certain rumor. I heard that a scary witch was searching for me. Only then did I finally believe it. The witch wanted me for her own.”

So she had consulted with Giulio. He had immediately quit his job and retired to their current home in the forest. Apparently, he was not strapped for cash. He was well-off enough to have easily purchased an expensive slave, after all.

And then, the two of them had come up with a plan to ambush the witch. They spread rumors about a couple living in the forbidding forest. Soon, the rumors reached the witch's ears.

“The witch arrived at our house a few days ago. She attacked my master—she was trying to kill him. No matter how skilled a warrior my master is, he was fighting a witch... There was no way he could win. That's why...”

She wrung her hands.

Her slim, white fingers were trembling slightly.

“I killed the witch.”

The witch had wanted Eustia so badly. It was only a matter of going to her, just as she desired. Then one stab into her defenseless back, and everything was over.

It had been a simple matter, really.

And with the witch's death, the curse was lifted. Everything was settled with that one move. Evil had been vanquished, and now the two lovers could be together forever.

That was the plot of their story so far.

“My master truly saved me. Thanks to him, I was finally released from the terrible curse. I'm finally free. That's why I want to marry him and spend the rest of my life with him.”

Eustia was practically beaming.

“However, there is just one thing... I’d like to meet my mother someday. I’m sure she didn’t want to abandon me. I just know it. In my memories, she seems so kind. I want to wait here for her, for as long as it takes,” Eustia said.

I wonder whether she’ll go on to live a happy life, now that the witch who caused her so much pain is gone...

...Waiting there, for her mother.



One week earlier...

I was taking a moonlit stroll around a distant city, far from the forbidding forest, when I encountered a strange woman.

“.....”

You may think it’s rude to call her a strange woman, but when I saw the mage lying collapsed facedown in the exact center of the main avenue, at first, I thought that she was sick or injured, and went into a terrible panic.

So I rushed over and helped the woman sit up. “A-are you all right?!” Even my voice was uncharacteristically erratic.

“...Um...I’m so sorry... I...uhhh...I can’t move...”

She appeared to be alive. Looking closer at the woman with long black hair, I saw that she wore a star-shaped brooch on her breast, and I gathered that she was a witch. But her brooch was quite old. She had probably been a witch for a long time.

I could guess that she was likely quite skilled.

What on earth could have driven such a powerful witch to this place...?

Warily, my eyes darted about our surroundings.

“Gurgururu!”

The cry of some unfamiliar beast filled the air. I wondered if some dreadful monster was prowling just out of sight, and if that terrible beast was responsible for attacking this witch.

.....

No, despite my fears, the awful noise was obviously coming from the woman's belly. It was simply the screaming of a stomach that could no longer stand being empty.

"...I'm so hungry... I haven't eaten anything for three days..."

As soon as she said that, the woman passed out right there in my arms.

"....."

This again?

From now on, if I catch sight of someone lying in the street, I think I'll just ignore them.

"...I owe you a great debt. Recently, I've been rushing from city to city, so I've rarely had time for a meal. I thought I was about to die, with my destination right in front of my eyes..."

Eventually, I'd gotten the starving woman back to my hotel room and offered her the sandwich I had bought for dinner.

As she quelled her rumbling stomach, the woman told me her name was Sirith, and also revealed that she herself was a traveling witch. She and I had a lot in common, it seemed. I felt strangely close to her.

I, too, gave a simple self-introduction, a little late, and she said just what I was thinking.

"Goodness! I knew I felt a connection to you somehow!"

I see, I see, so I suppose we are similar, in some ways.

However...

"Why were you rushing from city to city? Were you on the run from somebody you offended? Or did you get into a bind after you tried to run a scam and got caught by the police? ...I'm sure that's hardly uncommon for a traveling witch...right?"

If I understood the situation, it would be dangerous for us to spend too much time together. It would be safer for both of us if we separated as quickly as

possible, I thought.

But she quickly shook her head at me.

“No, I am a traveling witch. I have never once done anything like offending a host or tricking people out of money. I’m a traveler, and a witch, and I hold myself to the highest standards.”

“...R-right. That’s how traveling witches are, absolutely. We definitely never cause problems in the places we visit.”

“Hmm? Is there something interesting outside?”

“Oh, n-nothing...”

I was staring intently out the window. The moon looked brilliant in the clear sky, unlike the cloudy conversation we were heading toward, so I cleared my throat once, forcefully, and steered us back on course. “So then, why did you collapse?”

“...I was panicking. There are all sorts of deeper reasons for that, but...” When she had said that much, the older witch suddenly looked right at me. “Um, by the way, I’m going to ask you something unrelated, but... Elaina, have you already visited many places near here?”

“No, not at all...I haven’t yet.”

“Goodness...” Sirith’s expression clouded over, as if I had disappointed her somehow. “So you don’t know about the Wandering Wood?”

“Hmm? No...”

The Wandering Wood?

I see, I see. Just from the name, I can tell it’s a strange place.

It might be fun to go see it if I have the free time.

“I’m on my way there...,” Sirith continued. “So then, you must not know about the person who lives in the middle of the Wandering Wood either, right?”

I nodded. “Unfortunately not.”

“I see...”

“...So,” I asked, “you’re headed for this Wandering Wood?”

“Yes. I’m going to meet that person.” She told me bit by bit. “I’ve been looking for someone for a long time, and...I’ve heard a rumor that they have made a home deep in the forest.”

“And that is the person you’re searching for?”

“Probably. They should be.” Sirith nodded quietly. “Well, I still don’t know anything for certain, so I had hoped I could get some information from a fellow traveler, but... If you don’t know anything, there’s nothing to be done about that.”

There was no way for me to know about any people living there, I had only just learned about this fascinating Wandering Wood. As she had said, I could not really help her.

“Why are you searching for that person, anyway?”

You could say there was also no helping my curiosity.

In response to my candid inquiry, Sirith replied, very directly, “Because she’s my daughter. She was sold into slavery when she was only a child. My daughter is in those woods.”



Long ago, Sirith had been living in a faraway land. She held a rather disturbing title—the Curse Witch—but she fulfilled an essential role in protecting the country. She was highly regarded in her homeland, for her area of greatest specialty was curses that, once cast, could never be removed, except by her will...or her death.

Sirith’s home had been immersed in a period of strife and war, you see.

She had eliminated traitors selling government secrets, used her powers to manipulate enemy leaders, even jinxed her own nation’s soldiers to feel no fear. The Curse Witch certainly lived up to her awful moniker.

But all her terrible efforts were in vain, and her motherland was headed for ruin.

She exposed so many traitors that paranoia gripped the city, and whenever

one of their leaders died unexpectedly, people assumed that she had cursed them. The soldiers who had lost all fear of death ran off on suicide missions into enemy territory, and one by one they perished.

The nation had relied too heavily on the Curse Witch and had doomed itself in the process. The city quickly fell to pieces. It was defenseless against an enemy invasion.

“When it became clear that the enemy was going to invade, I stayed behind with the soldiers to buy some time for the civilians to get out. My daughter escaped with the others.”

“.....”

“The soldiers all died, and I fought until my magical energy was all but exhausted. After buying as much time as I could, I was supposed to link up with the people who had gotten away and escape to somewhere outside the country. But at the designated meeting spot, I found a pile of corpses.”

“...What happened to your fellow citizens who fled?”

“Most of the adults were killed. Most of the children were carried off by the enemy. Apparently, they saw through our plan. I thought I was holding them off, but really, they were just keeping us busy.”

“...So, your daughter?”

“She was taken by the enemy as a slave.”

I suppose you weren't able to get your daughter out.

Not even a powerful witch could march into an enemy army alone and expect to make it out all right. And even if her daughter had survived, there was no guarantee that Sirith could find her. I'm sure this had not been lost on her.

“After my daughter was abducted, I snuck into the enemy country only once.”

There were sure to be more than a few people who would recognize the Curse Witch, so she had dressed up like a vagrant, covered her face with a heavy hood, and gone undercover in the slave quarter.

When she saw her daughter in the slave district, how sad she must have been! How badly she must have wanted to save her! But she was surrounded

by the enemy. Rescue was impossible.

Sirith told me that all she had been able to do was to stick her wand into her daughter's cage. She couldn't risk causing an uproar.

"All I could do was to make it so that no one could hurt my daughter."

Her daughter, who was lined up like a piece of merchandise.

Sirith had said, *"It is my will that you shall never be owned by another. So shall it be!"* and placed a curse on her.

It was a curse that poisoned her spit, her tears, her sweat, all her body fluids. No matter what terrible master purchased her, no matter what abuses she suffered, at least no one could take her most private dignity.

That was all Sirith was able to do for her daughter—for Eustia—at that time.

"After that, I left the city. The curse wouldn't have been any use if I had been killed, after all, so...there was nothing more to be done."

And so she waited, biding her time as she traveled the world, all the while nurturing a secret desire to meet her daughter again. She held fast to the hope that her daughter would somehow escape her place of bondage, and everywhere she went, she asked about a slave girl with beautiful black hair.

More than ten years passed.

"Finally... Finally the time came. I overheard a rumor that my lost child was taken by a new master to live deep in the Wandering Wood. Finally, I can save her..."

Sirith clenched her fists very, very tightly.

After all these years, her dearest hope was in sight.

"...I hope that you are able to meet your daughter safely," I said. "So, what are you planning to do after the two of you are reunited?"

At that question, she thought for just a moment, then answered, "Let's see... after I drive her evil master away, I think I'll retire to live in the forest with her. In the middle of the Wandering Wood, we should be able to live in peace."

Sirith smiled contentedly.



After Eustia had finished telling me her whole story, I was ready to leave.

“Thank you for the meal. It was delicious. I really appreciate it.” I bowed formally. “I’ve really got to get going, so I’ll take my leave.”

“Ah, in that case, I’ll see you off.” Eustia stood from her seat and pitter-pattered over to me.

She had promised to escort me, after all.

“If you mean to take me through the forest like you promised,” I said, “that won’t be necessary. I can find my own way. ...If it comes down to it, I can fly above the forest on my broom.” I shook my head slowly. “Well then...”

I opened the door and stepped outside. Eustia stood there, one arm extended, as if to stop me. But I kept my eyes down as I hurried off.

I couldn’t stand being in that place any longer.

The house was nestled in a small forest clearing. Laundry was drying on a line nearby. The place had a lived-in feeling.

Next to the house was someone’s grave. I couldn’t see the name. But from the freshness of the overturned earth, I could tell that whoever was buried there had passed away only recently.

I was certain that the grave had been dug only a few days earlier.

“Elaina.”

Giulio called out as I lingered near the grave. He jogged over to me, alone. Eustia must have been inside still.

“...Did I forget something?” I feigned confusion.

He shook his head, “You didn’t forget anything. I was just worried because you seemed a bit upset by the end of the story.”

I thought I had been holding it together pretty well, but I guess he saw through me.

I looked away. “It’s nothing, really.” My gaze fell on the grave at my feet. It was just there, a lonely pile of dirt and nothing else.

“.....” Giulio followed my gaze. “...Neither Eustia nor I have any idea what this witch was thinking when she placed the curse on Eustia. She died before she could tell us the truth, you see.”

“...I can see that.”

“Sometimes I wonder... I wonder whether this witch was really so evil. What she did made Eustia unhappy, no doubt about it. It was a cruel curse that made it so she could never live a normal life... A bit like forcing her into a life of slavery.”

“.....”

“You know, I always assumed the witch was evil, but sometimes I think perhaps we didn’t see the whole picture. Perhaps that witch had some good reason for placing the curse on Eustia. I’ve got a feeling that might be the case. Anyway,” Giulio muttered, “I built this grave as a small attempt at atonement.”

And then...

“What about you?” He turned to look at me.

“Me?”

Giulio nodded sharply. “No one enters the Wandering Wood without a good reason,” he said. “So there must have been something. Why else would you go out of your way to walk through the middle of the forest, even though you can fly on your broom?”

“.....”

“Perhaps you came to meet someone—”

“No.”

I cut him off, shaking my head.

No one entered the forest without a good reason... Well, even supposing that I had a good reason, I wasn’t going to tell them what it was. Not ever.

Perhaps I had come to meet someone, but that had nothing to do with the two of them now.

And so, I lied as best as I could.

“I just wanted to take a shortcut. Really, that’s all there was to it.”



CHAPTER 6

Elaina as a Child Witch

The story so far.

My name is Elaina. I'm The Ashen Witch. When I was barely in my teens, I earned the title of witch: the most prestigious rank among magic users. Then I set off on a journey to charm the whole world.

But hardship is an unavoidable part of travel. One thing or another happened, and before I knew it, my body had shrunk, and my mind had regressed back to about age ten!

"Waah...there's no way I can continue my journey like this..."

Apparently, my magical abilities had also regressed; my immature body couldn't keep up with the levels of magic I was used to commanding. I could still cast spells, but not particularly well. My title of witch wasn't going to do me much good now.

On the other hand, I had gotten about 30 percent cuter, so I also felt like everything would somehow work out okay.

Since I could still use some magic, I just adjusted the clothes I was wearing down to child-size. I suppose I must have been a very talented ten-year-old after all. Good for me.

"....."

...Well, I wouldn't call any of this "good."

Still coming to terms with this absolutely astounding development, I surveyed my surroundings.

I was in a hotel room. My personal belongings were piled up in a corner. Out the window I could see a city standing still under a blanket of snow. Fortunately, even though my body had regressed, my memories of what had happened up to yesterday were clear in my mind.

So then, just what on earth happened?

Let me set the scene.



I arrived in that particular city on a wintery day. The eaves of the dark red brick buildings were painted over in pristine white. The snow had fallen recently, but now there were no clouds in the brilliant sky. However, despite the clear weather, precious little of the sun's warmth seemed to reach the neatly lined avenue where I was walking.

I was wearing my black robe and triangular hat, a scarf wrapped around my neck, and thick tights, but the relentless cold found its way in through every gap and brushed my body with its chill.

"...So cold."

Even with my hands stuck deep into my pockets, there I was, staring at the ground, trying to fend off the chill. If I didn't bite down to keep my teeth together, they would've started chattering. I'll add that I was shivering like a newborn deer.

The people of this city seemed to be used to this kind of cold. Men and women much more lightly dressed than I were running roadside stalls or enjoying their shopping as they walked calmly down the street, undaunted by the frosty weather.

"Excuse me. You there, young lady. There's something you wish you could change about yourself, isn't there?"

Apparently, some people felt so comfortable they figured they ought to ply their trade right there in the street. The voice that had called out to me all of a sudden came from a girl who was seated on a wooden crate on the corner.

She was wearing a round, flat hat that looked soft and fluffy, and hanging out from the bottom of that hat were smooth, beautiful golden waves of hair. Her outfit was gorgeous. She was dressed in a black robe designed like an elegant gothic dress. On top of her lovely clothing, her voice was elegant and refined, so it was abundantly clear that she was the daughter of some respectable family.

But...

"I oughtta be calling you the young lady..."

She looked like she was probably only about ten years old.

“Hmph! I’ll ask you not to look down on me! One day, I’m going to become a great witch... I’ll have you know I am an extremely promising novice! And I will not let this miserable little town hold me back! Now, you will show me some respect!” she insisted breathlessly.

...And here I was hoping that today I could check into a hotel and get an early night’s rest. Why am I a magnet for such weirdos?

“Okay, okay, what did you mean when you asked if there was something I wish I could change? I don’t feel particularly unhappy with anything in my life.” I tried to move the conversation forward. “Also, I’m telling you right now, I’m not accepting religious solicitations.”

“Worry not! I am no evangelist! Actually, I have recently developed an incredible new medicine. Which is...this! Ta-da!” The girl made a mysterious sound effect with her mouth as she pulled something up and out of the box she had been sitting on. It was a vial with a transparent liquid inside. “Let’s see... Try this medicine. If you drink it, your body will go, like, *bam!* And it’ll be all *whoa!* Amazing, right?!”

Her descriptions were awfully vague. They didn’t tell me a single thing.

“Anyway, if you drink this, it’ll have an amaaazing effect!”

“An amaaazing effect, you say?”

I have no idea what that’s supposed to mean.

“I especially recommend it for people like you.”

“...Look here, what do you mean by ‘people like me’?”

When I asked, the girl put on a huge grin, and after placing her hands on her own breast, she spoke full of confidence, “Your boobs will get big!”

The girl’s own chest was like a sheer cliff.

“That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“It is not a lie! I’m serious about this. If you drink this, they really will get bigger!” She waved her arms around frantically. “Belieeeeve meeee!”

The liquid in the vial began to bubble. At this point, any desire to drink the vial's contents had already completely vanished.

"No way. I'm definitely not drinking that. It's definitely some sketchy drug, isn't it?"

"You're wrong! It's an outstanding discovery that took me half a year to develop!"

"An outstandingly suspicious drug, you say? Okay, well, good-bye." After further cementing my decision not to drink the strange liquid under any circumstances, I turned on my heel and walked away.

"Wait, you jerrrk!" The girl chased after me, shouting some words I didn't quite understand. "You absolutely will not regret drinking it! You must drink it! Drink—aah!"

That's when I heard an awful smashing sound, along with the girl's shriek.

...I pretty much understood what had happened behind me before I even turned around.

"...*Sniffle*. My creation...it's..."

The snowy ground was steadily getting soaked with the contents of the shattered vial. A small puddle was forming on the road.

The girl's outstanding discovery had met its untimely end in an instant. She was sitting dejectedly on the ground, crying.

"Um...are you all right?" I touched the girl on one shoulder.

She let out a sob, "*Hic*...I worked so hard to make it..."

"Ah...sorry about that."

"I went to such great pains..." She had very elegantly covered her eyes with both hands, but I could guess that beneath those hands, tears were probably being shed.

"...Um, what about backups?" I asked, and the girl slowly shook her head.

...*Why didn't you make any extra?*

"...There aren't any backups, but... I do have some other medicines..."

Completely disheartened, the girl stood and walked with staggering steps over to the crate. She opened the lid. "...Ah, but all of them are failures. They're just garbage...even if you did drink any of these, they wouldn't have any effect... I wonder if I should stop this roadside business already..."

"....."

It was as if the confident girl I'd seen moments ago had shattered along with her special medicine. Now she looked utterly wretched, crying as she pulled vial after useless vial out of her crate.

Honestly, I couldn't bear to watch. If anyone asked, I don't think I could say it was my fault, but it was an unavoidable fact that encountering me was the start to her losing her precious discovery, or whatever it was.

"What's the most normal medication you have in one of those vials?"

Ultimately, I decided to take one of her potions.

"...This one," she said, as she held out a single small vial toward me.

"What does it do?"

"...It makes you feel as if you've grown taller."

"....."

"...Will you take it? It costs one silver piece."

"...All right, just a little."

Feeling like I pretty much had to drink the potion, I took the vial from her. Then I opened the lid and took just the slightest amount into my mouth.

"...How is it?"

"...Somehow I feel as if I have grown a little taller..."

"....."

"....."

It was difficult to describe my feelings as I ultimately handed her one gold piece for the medicine (I gave her extra as an apology) and left the girl behind.

After that encounter, I walked around the city for a little while, then headed toward the main government office.

“Oh, are you the Ashen Witch? I’ve been waiting for you.” A government official received me cordially. “Come now, this way please—”

In the reception room I was shown to, there were two sofas facing each other, and the heat radiating from the crackling fireplace in the corner of the room wrapped my chilled body in pleasant warmth. After removing my coat, I had a seat on a sofa.

The official spoke as he sat down across from me, “I believe you have already heard the story from the branch office of the United Magic Association, but... we’re requesting your assistance dealing with a certain mage who lives in this city.”

As a witch and a traveler, I do often accept commissions. This time, as I had been getting ready to depart for my next destination, I’d gotten a request from the United Magic Association that read: *A mage in the next city over is behaving poorly and acting rather violently. We want you to do something about it.*

I don’t even belong to the United Magic Association, but unfortunately, there were no member mages in the vicinity. And on top of that, the situation was urgent, so it happened that the organization called upon me personally.

I had just basically run out of money, so the substantial reward was enough to get me to accept the job.

That was the reason why I’d come to this city.

“Oh, we truly are in a bind here, you know. That mage is a nuisance! She’s totally out of control! We just don’t know what to do about her...”

Then the official gave me a simple summary of the situation.

The novice Priscilla was young, only about ten years old, and yet she possessed exceptional talent. As a mage, she was the equivalent of a so-called genius.

However, she had never once channeled that talent in an appropriate direction.

The potions she made always possessed some peculiar qualities, for example.

In one instance, there was a strange potion that caused the drinker to suddenly sprout cat ears. Another time, one curious potion for some reason made the victim lose affection for everyone other than ten-year-old girls. There was also a terrible potion that changed the victim into a pig. Both eloquent and skilled at the art of deception, she was said to trick innocent citizens into drinking her weird concoctions by the roadside and swindle them out of their money.

However, since the victims were often the subjects of strange and unnatural transformations, it was sometimes difficult for them to report their mishaps to the authorities, and even when they did try to report them, it was hard to know what to do with their complaints. Until a recent explosion in cases, they had mostly flown under the radar.

I see, so she tricks her victims and silences them on top of that, while continuing to rip people off. Quite the schemer...

.....

But wait, did he say a ten-year-old mage?

A girl selling medicine by the roadside?

“So, what does this Priscilla girl look like?”

In response, the official said, “Let’s see—I believe...” and gazed into space like he was trying to remember, before answering me. “She’s a blond girl, who wears a robe that looks like a gothic dress, and a fluffy hat. Oh, and her way of speaking is oddly mature.”

“.....Oh, is that so?”

I’ve seen someone with that appearance somewhere before, haven’t I...?

I could even say I feel like I saw someone of that description less than an hour ago...

“Is something the matter? Miss Ashen Witch, you don’t look well...”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

The government official wore a puzzled expression, but went on, “Anyway, Priscilla is continuing to make her questionable potions and it’s causing trouble for the citizens. If we don’t deal with her quickly, the cost of the damage is only going to balloon.”

“.....”

I kept silent. After bowing his head politely to me, the official requested, “I would like to entrust you with quickly orchestrating the capture of Priscilla. We cannot allow the continued suffering of innocent people.”

I suppose there’s a chance I consumed one of those strange potions.

The girl I met certainly seems to have been strikingly similar to the description of Priscilla’s appearance, and she was acting the part...

Although, she did seem like quite a clumsy child...

There’s a possibility that it’s a coincidence; a passing resemblance between two strangers.

“Ah, right, right,” the official continued. “By the way, Priscilla purposely puts on an act as a clumsy, pitiful, dumb child in order to put adults off their guard, and she then cleverly engineers situations to trick them into drinking her potions. Please, be careful.”

“.....”

“Also, when she tells people that one of her potions is a failure, it usually has some strange side effects, so you need to be cautious about that, too.”

“.....”

Ah.

Seriously?

“Miss Ashen Witch, won’t you please accept this commission?”

The government official bowed to me once more.

.....

It wasn’t a question of accepting or not accepting.

“Of course. Leave it to me. I’ll resolve it for you at once.”

It was clear that if I didn’t take the job, it would mean all sorts of awful things for me.

“Oh! What promising words to hear!”

From the perspective of the admiring official, I suppose I probably looked like an amazing witch, brimming with a desire to see justice served.

But in reality, I’m just a bumbling, pitiful fool of a witch who is in a panic because she carelessly drank some suspicious potion.

Oh-hoh-hoh...

...That’s nothing to laugh about, is it?



Eventually, after I was done with the official, I hurried back to the place where I had encountered (the girl who I suspected was) Priscilla. But she had already disappeared, as if she saw right through my movements, and all that was left was a scuff where the crate had been.

No one was there, and after that I wandered anxiously around town, trying to follow traces of the girl. But if it was possible to find her with such little effort, the people of this city wouldn’t be having so much trouble with her, now would they? I didn’t find her at all. Nope.

I searched until sunset, growing more and more desperate, but I wasn’t able to find any clues as to where she had escaped to.

All my searching was in vain.

However, at the end of the day, even after walking around the city, not one effect of the drug I had swallowed had materialized.

Maybe the one she made me drink really was just a normal dud?

I’m not having any strange side effects... In fact, maybe the girl I met actually was just a different person who happened to resemble Priscilla all along?

As a matter of fact, I remained half-convinced of my doubts about the identity of the girl I had encountered that afternoon right up until I fell asleep in my hotel room.

Then, when I awoke the next morning, I had turned into a child.

“She really was the real deal, wasn’t she?!”

Aw, shoot!

With this and other age-appropriate childlike sentiments, I surrendered my (ten-year-old) self to frustration and dove back into bed.

“This means that the side effect of the drug that makes you feel as if you’ve grown taller is to shrink you down? What in the world?!”

Doesn’t the side effect completely surpass the effect of the main drug? I strongly recommend revising the name and calling it a shrinking potion. Though I would never have swallowed something with that name, not on pain of death.

But there was no overstating how pitiful it was that I had been tricked so easily.

Also, even in this hopeless situation, I had one more very serious problem.

I had no money.

“...I’ll be able to stay at this hotel for only three more days?”

When I compared the amount of money left in my wallet and the rates of the hotel and did the calculations in my tiny head, factoring in food costs and other expenses, my remaining funds would last three days. After that, I would be tossed out under a cold sky, still stuck in a child’s body. I would be ruined.

...It feels like I’m always facing money shortages like this, but as a traveler, between food costs, and money for paying tolls, and clothes for different climates, and everyday consumable goods, no matter how much money I have, it’s never enough. No matter what kind of clever scam I run to make a huge profit, the money disappears as quickly as melting snow. That’s just the way of things. I’ve come to feel that life is a never-ending struggle.

“...Haah...”

After letting out one big sigh, I stared up at the ceiling from my bed. For now I would postpone my search for Priscilla. I would have to start with a way to earn money...

Under a cold winter's sky, clad in a cheap red dress, wearing a hood of the same color, was a lone little girl.

"Matches... Doesn't anyone need any matches...?"

She was a little match-selling girl.

She held out the matches she pulled from her basket for people walking down the street to see, and asked in a frail voice, "Don't you need a match...?"

But the people's hearts were as cold as the winter weather, and they observed the little girl's efforts with frigid eyes. There was no sign at all that the number of matches in her basket would decrease.

"Matches... Doesn't anyone need—aah!"

The girl was continuing to offer up her matches when she bumped shoulders with a man passing in the opposite direction and fell down on the snow. Tears welled up in the girl's eyes as she carefully picked up the matches that had spilled on the ground, one by one.

"Heh. That's yer own fault for selling foolishness like matches in a place like this," spat the man who had bumped into the girl. "Well, I guess I'll take one."

Then the man snatched a match from the basket in the girl's hands. What an arrogant person he was.

"Uh, um...those are for sale..."

"Huh? Yer gonna try to take my money after runnin' inta me? Gimme one for free!"

"B-but..."

But the girl's resistance was futile, and the man snatched a whole box of matches and took off.

What a pitiful little girl she was.

By the way, that pitiful little girl, who on earth could she be?

That's right, it's me.

"Matches... Doesn't anyone need any matches...?"

Putting on an act as a pitiful little girl, I was trying exactly the same technique for making money that a certain ten-year-old mage somewhere had used. It was a totally scummy business.

“Ah...um...matches...” I kept on holding out matches to the passersby. And I kept on getting ignored.

I had yet to sell any of the matches. I had an embarrassing amount of my match inventory remaining, which I had stocked at a nearby general store.

If I could sell out of these, I could amass a splendid fortune, but...

“Hmm... Matches, huh? ...I don’t have much interest in matches, but are you short on money?”

In a rare development, a man approached me, looking curious. A moment like this could be my chance, so I tried to act as sweet as could be.

“That’s right...I...don’t have any place to live... If I don’t sell all my matches, I’ll be homeless...,” I answered, acting awkward and bashful.

I remembered to toss out a wistful glance from time to time. Wholesome young men who long to protect weak little girls (like me, for example) make such easy marks.

From there, things played out like they always do.

“Huh...is that so...? Tough break... If you want, how about I buy one of those matches?”

“R-really?! Thank you so much! That makes me so happy!”

“Anyway, how much?”

“One gold piece each.”

“All right, all ri— Huh?! One gold piece...? That’s for a box of matches, right?”

“One gold piece each.”

“...Isn’t that a little steep?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“What, is there something wrong with you?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“.....”

The young man wore an openly disgusted face. He was being overcharged a ridiculous price for a match, and it totally dampened his enthusiasm for making the purchase. As I watched, he even started to put the wallet he had been about to pull out back into his pocket.



However.

“H-hey! Miss!”

It happened just at the right moment. The arrogant guy who had stolen matches from me came back.

He looked quite flustered and was holding a match up for me to see. “Th-these! How much for one? Please lemme buy ’em!”

“One gold piece each.”

“Great! I’ll take ten!”

The generous old guy took out ten gold pieces on the spot and gave them to me. In return, I placed a box of ten matches in his hand.

“Thank you again for your business.”

After bowing to me, he ran off, muttering to himself, “Heh-heh-heh...these’re some amazing matches...! Revolutionary...”

I had been walking around selling matches, but I never said a single word about them being ordinary matches.

After all, there’s no way I could sell plain matches for one gold piece each, right?

“...Those matches... Do they have some kind of special trick to them or something?”

The young man looked down at me, wallet in hand.

So I grinned widely, and answered him with a question of my own.

“How about purchasing one and finding out with your own eyes?”



The novice Priscilla was working diligently at her questionable trade in the city, just as she had the day before.

“You there, is there anything you want to change about yourself?”

That is how she called out to passersby, before selling them medicines with amazing effects—by which I mean questionable drugs crowned with promising

names.

“This medicine here is amazing! Undeniably, it can cure obesity! How about it? Do you want to buy it now?”

Priscilla held up a vial to show to a chubby man who had stopped in front of her.

She flashed potions before the people’s eyes to provoke their complexes and aspirations, and most people reached out to take them. She could get women with small chests to drink a potion by saying it would make their chests bigger. She could get short people to drink a potion by saying it would make them taller. She even whispered to destitute people about a potion that would make them rich.

With such temptations, she was able to stop people in their tracks. Among those customers who stopped, about half bought a potion on the spot, drank it, and went on their way.

The remaining half either hesitated or were suspicious enough to turn to leave, but...when they did, just like the day before, Priscilla would pretend to be a pitiful little girl and fool them into drinking a potion anyway.

She always tricked people and scammed them out of their money. It was a shady business.

“No, I’m good. I’ve got these, you see. Heh-heh-heh...”

However, the fat man before her now didn’t even look at the little vial. He just struck a match, held it up, and grinned.

The small flame flickered and wavered uncertainly. It just looked like an ordinary match. However, the man must have been able to see something different.

“Heh-heh...this must be heaven...” He turned and began to walk away, leaving Priscilla to ponder his incomprehensible words.

“...? That guy was a little strange...”

Priscilla shrugged it off and called out to a different customer.

However...

“Ah, I don’t need any medicine. I’ve got these, after all... Ha-ha-ha-ha...” A woman walked by, staring into the flame of a match.

“Oh...I feel young again... This is the best...” An old man with a bent back ignored Priscilla and went on his way.

“Heh-heh-heh...so wonderful...” She could already tell there was no point in speaking to a man who walked past drooling.

What on earth had happened?

Priscilla’s business had suddenly ceased to pay off.

“*Tch*...looks like someone’s getting in my way, huh...? They’re playing a reckless game...!”

Priscilla was trembling with rage. It was immediately clear to her that some fool had trampled on her turf. Someone was messing with her business. In other words, whoever was selling those matches was looking for a fight.

“I’ll crush them!”

Priscilla stormed down the road, following the people holding matches.

She needed money—a lot of money—to accomplish her goals. She could not allow any interference.

Priscilla saw a crowd that had formed around a corner on the main avenue. The people were swarming, shouting, “Matches! Give us matches!”

Standing before the mob was the figure of a lone girl, smiling sweetly as she tried to keep the crowd under control. “Yes, yes. Please line up in order!”

If there was any doubt about the source of these suspicious matches, it was quickly resolved.

“Gah... Who is that little girl?!”

Priscilla, her eyes narrowed hatefully, was looking at a young girl of about ten years old. But as for who she might be, Priscilla couldn’t even hazard a guess.

She had ash-colored hair that came down to her shoulders. She had eyes the color of lapis lazuli. The dress she was wearing was the traditional garb passed down among the people of the region. But Priscilla had never seen such a girl in

this city before.

“.....” As she glared at her, Priscilla suddenly had a realization. “...The witch from yesterday...?”

The day before, Priscilla had tricked a witch into drinking an age regression potion by calling it a medicine designed to make her feel taller. So it didn't startle her to see the witch from yesterday in this form now. Actually, it seemed to suit her.

However...

“The witch from yesterday was the one who was dispatched by the United Magic Association...so what merit could there possibly be in doing something like this...?”

Priscilla had heard that the city government had summoned someone from an organization called the United Magic Association to deal with her. And that someone, the person who had been sent after Priscilla, was a witch: a person who had attained the highest magical title, to which all other mages aspired. A person above all others.

She never could have imagined that someone like a witch would deceive people and rip them off. Could a person of such status really conduct such a scummy business?

No, that's unthinkable—Priscilla shook her head. There's no way that scummy witches exist, is there?

So, what merit could there possibly be in doing something like that? What could she possibly be hoping to accomplish by lowering herself like this?

“.....! Don't tell me...!” Just then, Priscilla realized the true motive of the witch. “She's trying to indirectly interfere with my work. She intends to drive me out of business! What a nasty trick that is!”

That is how Priscilla interpreted the young witch selling matches. Her observation completely and utterly shelved any consideration of her own nasty tricks.

She could only see this as a provocation, as if the other girl was taunting her,

saying, “I didn’t suffer any side effects from your potion, see?”

“You’ll get your wish...! If you’re looking for a fight, then I’m going to take you up on it...!” Priscilla angrily ground her teeth. She probably looked awfully suspicious, standing there fuming on the street corner, but fortunately, the crowd of adults swarming around the young girl was far shadier, so Priscilla didn’t attract any attention.



The matches that I had created showed people whatever wild visions they liked.

In truth, they were just ordinary matches onto which I had applied a tiny spell. But they sold better than I ever expected.

Just like regular matches, once they were lit, it was just a matter of moments before they burned out.

“Give me some, too! I’ll buy ten!”

“Me too!”

“Hey! Don’t buy ’em all up!”

“Won’t you sell me some, too?!”

“Ahh! I want to see more visions! Please!”

My match stand was drawing crowds of people day after day. It was great. It was easy money. I even started to feel a bit like I didn’t care too much what happened with Priscilla.

“Yes, yes. Everyone will be served in turn. Please line up, okay?”

I spent every day raking in the easy money.

Who could have imagined that I would be able to purchase matches for so little and sell them for so much?

I really found a good business, huh...?

I congratulated myself on my recent financial success.

Which reminds me, until several days ago, I was all worked up over showing that I could quickly solve the matter of Priscilla, wasn’t I?

In my pursuit of easy profit, I'd forgotten all about my original business in this city. On the third day of my match-selling enterprise I received a reminder.

"You bastard! Do you understand where you are?! You're in Miss Priscilla's territory!"

A single brawny man suddenly pushed his way through the crowd. His eyes were bloodshot, and he wore thin clothing even in the middle of winter, as if he was baring his skin for the sole purpose of showing off his excess muscle. The man looked like a real meathead.

"What?" I acted like a pitiful little girl who didn't know anything. "Miss Priscilla's territory...is it? I'm sorry...I don't know anything about that...I was just thinking about making everyone happy..."

Usually, when I spoke in this tearful voice, things would more or less work themselves out. After all, I did look like a ten-year-old girl.

Hiding my face in an effort to disguise my cheeky disposition, I put on an exaggerated show of sniffing and sobbing.

However...

"It's no use crying! This is Miss Priscilla's turf! Hurry up and get outta here!"

The muscle-bound man just shouted and yelled.

As I glanced up at him from the gaps between my fingers, the man kept repeating himself, mumbling, "Miss Priscilla, Miss Priscilla, Miss Priscilla is amazing..."

Well, well, what's this?

"...Did you possibly drink some of Priscilla's medicine?"

"If you mean the medicine that a girl was selling by the roadside, then yeah, I drank it. Apparently, it increases muscle mass. Long live Miss Priscilla!"

"....."

He had probably been tricked into drinking a potion that turned him into Priscilla's puppet. It was obvious that she had sent him to shut me down. She was coming after me.

I see, I see.

“If you don’t get a move on, I’ve got some ideas of my own, see? Understand? With these muscles of mine, I’ll—”

“Okay.”

Since this irritating guy was somehow still flexing in front of my face, I struck a match and held it up for the muscleman to see.

“I’ll pound...you...” The muscleman stared into the flame. “...Oh, I can see— What is this match...?! I can see...such a wonderful world...!”

Even though he had downed one of Priscilla’s potions, my magic seemed to be no less effective.

The muscle-bound man before me was delighted by the apparition.

“A world full of muscles... I can see it...”

.....

That sounds like a vision of hell to me...

Anyway, after winning over Priscilla’s goon, I got back to my match business.

This sure is easy...



“What is the meaning of this...?!” Priscilla gasped as she watched the muscle-bound man get ensnared in an instant. The potion had put him under her control. *He should have used his massive muscles to pulverize that match*, she thought. She’d been convinced that his meathead brain would be too tiny to be affected by the match’s magic.

“Tch...” Priscilla was furiously biting her nails. “Well, that’s just fine... I have other minions at my command!”

Priscilla wheeled around, desperation plain on her face.

“Listen up, all of you! I want you to deal with that girl!”

Then she shouted in a loud voice, despite the fact that she had concealed herself in the shadows. At the moment, she wasn’t concerned with small details like revealing her position to the witch.

“As you wish...Miss Priscilla.” A slender man with glasses was waiting on Priscilla.

“Heh-heh-heh... So we can take down that girl, right?” This came from a young man with a creepy smile.

“Oh-hoh-hoh... Perhaps I’ll go all-out, for once...” A woman fixed her captivating gaze on the witch.

That’s right.

These were Priscilla’s Big Four.

They were the best of the best, who Priscilla had gathered over the past several days. Each of them alone was (by self-assessment) far stronger than any mage. In short, the group was rather short on brains.

They were called the Big Four, but there were only three of them now. The muscle-bound man had been the fourth.

He’d also been the strongest.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

The morale of the remaining three had taken a precipitous dive. It was so bad that Priscilla could hear them grumbling about wanting to go home.

“Hey now! Hurry up and go! Mooove iiit!”

Priscilla was pointing at the witch and throwing a tantrum.

“Wait, but Miss Priscilla...”

“Heh-heh-heh...afraid I can’t.”

“I’m scared...”

Even if they were under Priscilla’s control, it wasn’t like she had completely erased their sense of self-preservation.

“Grrr...” What good were all the special pains Priscilla had taken to enslave them if this was the result? “...All right, I understand. In that case, drink these

potions.”

Priscilla rustled around in her crate and pulled out three vials of medicine, which she handed to each minion.

It was a drug that would increase the drinker’s physical abilities.

“Oh...this is...!”

“A-amazing...!”

“Ahh...I can feel the power...!”

In short, they were doping.

“Oh-hoh-hoh...as long as I have this, everything will turn out fine! Now, go!”

And then, with their confidence restored, the Big Four (just three of them) marched forward with reckless bravery to take down a ten-year-old girl.



Some sort of strange group of three came over, so I showed each one of them the flame of a match.

“Huh? Seriously? She...likes me...? Wait, actually, I also...” The slim man with glasses appeared to see a vision of a girl confessing her love to him.

Well, well, how wholesome.

“Heh-heh... So weak... Humans are all so pathetic... Every single one...” This young man seemed to be engrossed in some sort of adolescent power fantasy.

That’s... Well, okay...

“Stop it! You mustn’t all fight over me...!” The beautiful woman appeared to be having a vision of many men competing for her attention.

Wow, despite her appearance, she’s really quite innocent...

Well, these three were probably also working for Priscilla, but I quickly brought them under my control.

In total, it took less than five seconds.



“Ugh...it seems anyone can be affected by those matches, so long as they’re

human...”

By sacrificing all her minions, Priscilla had learned a costly lesson.

However, sending in her Big Four, starting with the muscleman, was not the whole extent of her strategy. Several full days had now passed since she had first discovered the de-aged witch interfering with her business.

She was not the type of girl to let that time go to waste.

“Oh-hoh-hoh...I would have preferred to avoid getting my hands dirty if I could, but...there’s no way around it now...”

She pulled out a new vial of medicine and let out a bold laugh.

That witch from the United Magic Association is just getting in the way of business. She’s no one I need to be afraid of. I thought I could enchant a few minions to get rid of her quickly, but she won’t back down. Now I’ve got no choice but to use a more...forceful method!

“It’s over for you...witch!”

Priscilla opened the vial dramatically.

And released the beast.



Less than an hour after I’d bewitched the four strange people with my matches, Priscilla sent over yet another assassin.

“...Ah-choo!”

As soon as I laid eyes on the creature, I sneezed.

Priscilla seemed to have realized that my matches were effective on most humans and had given up on sending people to take me out. This new creature that appeared before me didn’t seem like it would be even a little bit interested in matches.

“Mraaaaaaaaaaaaaooooooooow!”

It was a cat.

But it was such an enormous cat that I had to crane my neck to look at it.

Sniffing through my itchy nose, I stood stock-still, in a daze.

“What is that beast?!”

“It’s awful!”

“Run away! Everybody, run!”

“That thing will eat you alive!”

As expected, all the match-drunk people surrounding me came back to their senses with the appearance of the monster, and the crowd that had formed in the road scattered in an instant.

Oh no, my easy marks...

“Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh! Serves you right, witch! This is how you meet your end!”

Priscilla was there, gloating loudly from the shadows of a distant alleyway.

“...Ah-choo!”

For just a brief moment, I thought about going right over to her and putting her through a painful experience, but there was the huge cat right in front of me, blocking the way.

“It’s too late for tears! You would do well to repent your interference with my business!”

I am, of course, horribly allergic to cats, and the presence of this enormous specimen was making my eyes burn and my nose terribly itchy. That was the reason I was tearing up.

It certainly wasn’t out of fear.

More importantly, could it really be true that the matches had no effect on animals? Honestly, taking on such a fearsome opponent would have been difficult, even if I hadn’t been stuck in a ten-year-old’s body with the magic proficiency to match. I decided it was best to avoid a battle, so—

“Okay!”

I struck a match and held the flame up for the cat to see.

“Mrooow...”

It worked.

It actually worked.

“Huh, no way... It’s working...?”

A shocked voice echoed from somewhere off in the distance.

When I tossed the match far away from me, the huge cat let out another “Mrooow” and chased the small flame away.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the contest was already settled.

“Grrrrrrr...”

As I advanced step-by-step toward her, Priscilla inched away, looking frightened and annoyed. The girl’s behavior was a bit strange, as even in her retreat, she still maintained a confident attitude.

Keeping her in suspense, I advanced toward her ever so slowly. “So, what will you do now? Will you surrender? Will you fight? Of course, I don’t mind either option, you know? Either way, *the result will be the same.*”

Priscilla steadily retreated away from me, down the narrow alleyway. She was gradually, gradually, being backed against a wall. She didn’t have any options left.

“So. What will you do?”

I cocked my head questioningly once again.

“Tch...” Finally driven all the way back into the wall, Priscilla still didn’t seem inclined to surrender. “Th-this must be a joke...! I’m going to become a great witch in the future! I can’t meet my end in a place like this!”

Then she pulled a wand from her breast pocket.

“Oh? Sorry, what did you say?” The moment Priscilla tried to bring her wand to bear, I sent it flying out of her hands.

As a ten-year-old, I wasn’t able to cast complicated spells, but sending an opponent’s wand flying was another matter. It was my signature move.

“.....”

“.....”

Priscilla’s wand fell to the ground with a clatter.

But she wasn’t one to give up just like that. “H-humph! Spellcasting isn’t even my strong suit, anyway!”

With her voice wavering quite a bit, she pulled a small vial from the same breast pocket. She seemed to be telling me that her area of expertise lay in potions instead.

“Get a taste of this!”

She threw the vial before I was able to flick it away with my wand.

“Ah-ah, do you really think that’s going to work?”

It’s a simple matter to snipe something out of the air.

I hit the vial with a midair burst of magic, and it crashed down in the middle of the road and shattered.

“.....”

I stood at attention, waiting several seconds for her to make a move. She really looked like she was about to cry, staring at the broken vial. Then she threw another small vial at me, accompanied by yet another desperate shout.

“H-have a taste of this one, too!

I knocked it down with ease.

“.....”

“...Take that! And that!”

She continued throwing vial after vial at me, but even despite my ten-year-old appearance, I still possessed considerable magical skill. I wasn’t about to take a direct hit from an attack like that.

The wreckage of who knows how many little vials was accumulating on the ground.

Every time she threw one, her expression turned grimmer.

“Um...I...don't have any...weapons left, but...”

Priscilla was trembling like a baby deer in a corner of the alley.

“Ah, so you don't.”

She was finally defeated.

I began to close the distance between us again.

“...Umm...? My weapons are all...” Trembling fearfully, Priscilla looked even smaller than when I had first met her.

“Your weapons? What about them?” Grinning as widely as possible, I continued to close on her. “By the way, I have to ask, for my own curiosity really... What were you hoping to accomplish by making suspicious magical potions and selling them for a high price in a backwater town like this?”

“Um... Huh? That's...well...” The spirited girl from before was nowhere to be seen. She now gave the impression of cornered prey. “Um...I...I wanted to become a witch... So I just...”

“I can't understand what you're saying, could you speak a little more clearly?”

“Eep!”

Priscilla's shoulders jolted in surprise. Quaking violently where she had sunk to the ground, she said, “Um... This is a rural town, so I wanted to make money to set out for the city and study magic.”

“Uh-huh. A splendid goal.”

“S-so you'll forgive me, r-right...?”

“No, this and that are two different conversations.”

I'll thank you not to get carried away. But while I have the opportunity...

“We also need to have a different conversation about my body shrinking down. The potion that you tricked me into drinking, exactly how long before the effect wears off?”

“...About one week.”

“And there's no way to fix it a little faster?”

“You would revert immediately if you used the antidote, but...”

“And where is the antidote?”

“At my house...”

“Uh-huh.”

Which means that I can return to normal right away.

Great news. Because of course, there’s no way I could keep traveling like this. I was just thinking I’d like to change back already.

...I’ve already caused quite disturbance in this city, and it’s not easy running a business when you look like a ten-year-old, either.

“All right then, would you please change me back?”

I smiled at the girl.

“Huh?” Priscilla seemed to misunderstand something about my smile, because her face suddenly brightened after she looked at me for a moment. “Well, well...! Then maybe, after you’re back to normal, you could overlook what I did?”

She peered up at me, talking nonsense.

What are you talking about?

“You know there’s no way that’s happening.” Still smiling, I continued, “But I’m not an evil witch, either, so I can give you the privilege of choice. Would you rather experience a painful vision, or a scary one, before you return me to normal? Which would you prefer?”

And then...

The screams of a ten-year-old mage echoed through all corners of the city that day.



“And that’s pretty much the summary of what happened.”

After taking the antidote and returning to my normal form, I handed Priscilla over to the authorities and gave them a simple report summarizing the details of the incident.

“Is that so...?” The government official nodded after he’d finished reading the report. “So, she did those things just because she wanted to make money...?”

I nodded sharply.

“Well, to put it another way, she couldn’t come up with any other way to make the money. If you’re interested, I think she’s planning to leave town once she has the funds.”

“Hmm...” The official nodded in understanding. “Ah, come to think of it,” he said, “for several days, from the day you came here up until yesterday, a little girl was selling matches around town... You wouldn’t know anything about that?”

“I would not.”

“Is that so...? Apparently, those matches had some sort of strange spell cast on them... The citizens were all getting match-drunk because of it, but...you wouldn’t know anything about that?”

“I would not.”

“Also, yesterday, there was a report of a huge cat appearing in town...”

“I know nothing.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t... We’re conducting our own search for the beast, but we haven’t come up with anything, you see...”

Naturally, Priscilla had also had an antidote that had transformed the monster back into its original house cat form. So at this point, I didn’t think they would find it no matter how long they searched.

Groaning quietly, the government official lowered his eyes to the report I had put together.

“Miss Witch... Are you really planning to submit this report to the Association?”

“Is that bad?”

“No, it’s not bad, but...”

He muddled the end of his sentence and let out another low groan.

The report I was planning to submit to the United Magic Association came to a conclusion with this statement:

The mage Priscilla caused an incident of this nature, because she has not received a proper magical education. There can be no doubt that if she studies magic under a proper teacher, in the future she is likely to become a promising witch. Accordingly, I judge that no punishment or penalty is necessary at this time.

In other words, there was no need to throw her in a cell or sentence her to any sort of punishment. Or perhaps I should say, when it came to doling out punishment, I had already done so personally. The only thing left for the adults to do was to give her a good scolding.

For the time being, Priscilla only really knew enough magic to brew her questionable potions. But she was still just ten years old. There was still time.

She had a lot to learn, not just about magic, but about the world as well.

“She simply doesn’t understand yet what it is to be a witch, or to use magic spells. At any rate, I expect she plans to leave soon.”

She seemed to have acquired plenty of money, and probably wanted to depart right away. And besides...

“Wouldn’t sentencing a ten-year-old girl to a harsh punishment tarnish your city’s honorable reputation?” I asked. “You can punish the girl, a rare mage to find out here in a country town like this, or you can gain her lasting gratitude by overlooking this little incident, so that in the future, when she finally becomes a full-fledged witch, she returns to serve the people here. Which do you think is better?”



After that, Priscilla was reprimanded severely by the city government official.

The official carried on at great length, preaching the evils of running scams, expounding the virtues of an honest wage, telling her myriad tales about the suffering she had caused for many people by continuing to sell her suspicious potions, and showing her the mountain of complaints and injury reports that had come in.

From an outsider's perspective, it was an ordinary scolding.

Priscilla was just an ordinary child being scolded for something bad she had done.

Finally, after the official had been lecturing her for the better part of an hour, he wrapped it up, saying, "...Well, that's enough talk. You should be careful from now on."

There was no punishment, and no penalty. It was all over with just a simple lecture.

"Um...?"

Priscilla looked like she had been expecting something more. "So there's no... fine or anything...?"

But the official just shook his head. "You don't need to worry about the money," he said casually. "I've taken the liberty of arranging for reparations to be paid to your victims."

"...Huh?"

"By which I mean, the money we were planning to pay to the witch we commissioned is being reappropriated for that purpose, because..." The government official shrugged as if he was fed up with the whole affair. "I was asked to redirect the entirety of the reward money to reparations."

In other words, the witch must have done the work out of the kindness of her heart.

The official seemed to be telling Priscilla that she was forgiven, since this was her first offense.

"....."

But if you think about it, the witch must have made plenty of money thanks to her dirty match-selling scheme, so giving up the reward doesn't seem like that big a deal.

"Oh, also, I have a present for you from the witch." The government official handed Priscilla a large package. "I was actually instructed to give this to you after she had left the city, but... Well, it's exciting, so I'll go ahead and hand it

over now.”

Priscilla hesitantly accepted the package, fearfully wondering what sort of present that awful witch would leave. Cautiously, worried it might explode or something, she slowly opened the package.

“...?”

But it was another anticlimax.

All that was inside was an ordinary book.

“Apparently, she’s a witch who travels far and wide, and she’s been to just about every place of note in this region. In this book she’s collected all sorts of useful information for when you go to study magic in the outside world. She said to put it to good use.”

Priscilla flipped through the book, paying the official’s words no attention.

Inside were maps of the neighboring regions. Guidelines for traveling alone. Details and explanations about the countries the witch had already visited, and detailed notes on how they received mages, as well as whether they had schools where one could study magic.

It seemed like a parting gift custom-made for Priscilla.

Written at the end of the book was just one line.

I wish from the bottom of my heart that one day you will become a splendid witch.

That is how she had brought the book to a close.



As the curtain fell on that hectic incident, I took my leave of the city.

I had originally come to this city to do a job, so there was no need for me to stay too long. Well, I say I came to do a job, but I didn’t actually do anything all that substantial.

In the end, I mostly walked around selling enchanted matches. Some other things happened. I was turned into a ten-year-old by a weird potion, and battled a weird little girl while in my ten-year-old state. But all that stuff was behind me. Honestly, it didn’t seem particularly noteworthy now.

“Miss Elaina!”

That’s why I was rather surprised to hear someone calling out to me like that. I didn’t recall anyone idolizing me as “Miss Elaina” or whatever.

“Miss Elaina! Please, wait!”

Next thing I knew, there was a hand clinging tightly to my arm.

“...What is it?”

When I turned around, there was Priscilla, eyes sparkling.

“Miss Elaina! No, my dear big sister!” For some reason, Priscilla was addressing me differently now. “Thank you so much for the book!”

“...Book? Um...no, it was nothing. Just a token.”

How strange... I was sure I said, “Understand? Give this book to her after I leave, all right? Make sure of it! Make sure you give it to her after I’ve left the city, okay?” I even repeated the request to be sure, but...

That government official must have had something clogging up his ears...

“This book that you left me, big sister, will become a treasured heirloom!” Priscilla looked innocent, smiling broadly. “Until now, there was no one around who could understand my dreams... This is the first time I’ve ever received something so wonderful!”

“Uh, sure. I’m glad that you like it...”

“Also, also, I’ve always aspired to become just like you, big sister! A strong, kind, cool, sleazy, scummy, rotten witch!”

“Are you...making fun of me...?”

“When I grow up, I’m going to become a witch exactly like you, big sister!”

“Wouldn’t you rather become a respectable adult? Anyway, my name’s not ‘big sister,’ you know...”

“Well, don’t you worry about the details, big sister!” Priscilla didn’t seem likely to amend her plan. Still wearing a grin, she tilted her head and asked, “More importantly, big sister, you’re going to leave town now, aren’t you?”

“...Well, I don’t really have any business here anymore, so...”

“In that case, take this!”

Priscilla placed a small vial in my hand.

Inside, a transparent liquid was sloshing around.

I looked at Priscilla. “Umm, what is this...?”

“That’s the amazing potion that I made you drink, big sister!”

“Uh, I don’t need anything amazing.”

“Please, drink it and think of me, okay...?”

Priscilla’s cheeks were suddenly red.

“I can’t think of a situation in which I would use this, though...”

“Oh-hoh-hoh...” Priscilla looked up at me with amorous eyes that belied her young age. “Someday, when I’m grown, I’m going to come see you, big sister... And then, you can drink that potion and we’ll be the same age, okay...? Then we can spend lots of time together!”

“I...don’t need this...”



“By the way, I made some improvements to the previous version of the potion. I adjusted it so that you regress one year for every sip you take!

That means that if you take ten sips, you’ll be ten years younger! You can flirt with boys of all ages! When we meet again, we can even go back to how old we were when we first met! It’ll be so nostalgic!”

“I feel like you’re gonna get arrested as soon as you leave home...”

“Please, take it as a gift!”

“I politely decline.”

“Don’t hold back! Please, go ahead!”

“I’m not holding back, I’m taken aback!”

“Goodness. You’re so cute when you’re embarrassed! But it’s all right! Even if you waste it, when we meet again, I’ll brew up the same potion and trick you into drinking it, whether you want to or not!”

It was like she was trying to convince me that resistance was futile.

I sighed, and then put the potion into my bag. “All right, I’ll take it...” It seemed like she wasn’t going to let me go if I didn’t.

Priscilla stared at me earnestly, eyes sparkling, and I put a hand on her head. I rubbed her fluffy hat, and she hummed quietly with a big smile on her face.

“Well, um... I’m sure you’ll face many trials from now on, but...do your best, okay?”

And then I waved good-bye and took my leave.

I walked on, with Priscilla at my back for the longest time, waving at me continuously and shouting, “Big sisterrrrrr!”

The city, where the eaves of the dark red brick buildings were lined up neatly, was, as always, painted over in dazzling white. The snow had already begun to melt, and under the brilliantly shining cloudless sky, it had started to look like sherbet.

It was as cold as ever.

I was idly musing about visiting someplace warm next.

“Good-bye, big sisterrrrrr!”

.....

It had been a simple matter, resolving a straightforward request from the United Magic Association, but there seemed to have been some unforeseen consequences.

I returned to my journey, hoping that, unlike Priscilla’s questionable potions, my time there would be free of side effects.



CHAPTER 7

To Know a Woman's Heart

“Ah...I just can't... I can't do it anymore...”

At a high-class hotel, a man was perched on a veranda railing, looking troubled as he stared into the distance. Sorrow hung over him like a dark cloud, and his expression was desperate, yet beautiful. He was an undeniably gorgeous young man...if you could ignore the bat-like wings sprouting from his back, that is.

“Argh, you gods! I curse you from the bottom of my heart! Why was I born this way...? A member of such a wretched and tiny race... If only I had been a normal human, I wouldn't have suffered like this... Life would have been easy... I mean, I'm super-hot, after all...”

The slender man glanced up at the heavens. The sky was cloudy and dark. Apparently, the gods couldn't bear to look him in his handsome face.

“There's nothing left for me now but death... If I fell from here...I'd be guaranteed a beautiful death...”

By the way, the room where he was staying was the fanciest room in a very fancy hotel. And it was on the top floor. If you peered down, the people coming and going along the main avenue appeared very small, like so many grains of rice.

Maybe he doesn't realize how little of him that fall would leave intact. Perhaps he isn't the brightest candle on the shelf...

“Umm...”

I tried to call out to him.

“Please! Don't try to stop me!” the handsome man cried. “I've already lost the will to live! ...Or perhaps— Are you a goddess, come to save me?”

“Huh? No, I'm, ummm...”

“I understand... Really, I do. You're very kind...to come stop a man about to

throw his life away... But please, leave me be... I have already lost any will to live on as a demon...”

“Uh-huh...”

“You truly are so kind... Will you listen to my troubles...?”

“Um...”

“You know, I... The truth is, ever since I was born, I’ve been trying to seduce women, but I’ve never been successful. Even with a face this handsome, women can’t seem to stand me. They always give me the cold shoulder.”

“Umm...”

“In short, I’m a virgin.”

“Umm.....!”

“My whole life, I’ve had no luck with women, and I don’t think that will ever change. So I’ve decided I’d rather die than continue struggling on with no reward for my efforts in sight and—”

“Umm!!” When his complaints grew vulgar, I decided it was time to raise my voice.

“Will you...comfort me?”

But the man apparently had other ideas.

(That was *absolutely not* the reason I had called out to him.)

“...No, that’s not it. You’re just a little loud. I can’t focus on my reading.”

“.....”

“Could you keep it down?”

“.....”

At the top floor of a high-class inn, there was a lone witch, elegantly indulging herself in some reading on her veranda.

That’s right, it’s me.

But the man in the next room over had suddenly started carrying on about self-harm, and it was really bothering me.

“...So, it’s just as I thought... No one...no one wants me...”

“.....”

Apparently, this annoying guy had latched on to me for some reason. If I left him alone now, he would probably jump. And even if he didn’t jump, he would probably continue his endless whining from the veranda next to mine, which would be even more annoying.

“Fiiine... I’ll hear you out if you want.”

“Bah, I don’t want your paltry kindness!”

“Got it. Don’t need to tell me twice.”

“Ah! Wait a second! Perhaps...a little kindness would be tolerable.”

“What’s your deal...?”

I think I probably narrowed my eyes quite a bit at that.

“The truth is, I’ve been a bit out of sorts... I’m sorry. Right now, I’m just a little emotionally unstable.” He hung his head with a sigh. “I’m sure it’s quite obvious, but I’m at the end of my rope here.”

“You don’t say.”

It was pretty obvious.

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“I’m Elaina.”

“Elaina, huh...? That’s a great name...” Fixing his gaze on me, he gave a weak smile. “By the way, Miss Elaina... I wonder if you would be kind enough to listen to a request...”

“Your last will and testament?”

“No.”

“...If it’s a stupid request, I’m going back to my room immediately, got it?”

“That’s fine! I’m no fool! This is a matter of life and death!” the handsome young man insisted.

I wonder what happened to the meek guy from a moment ago? Maybe he

ascended to heaven.

But now, I see that he really is emotionally unstable.

I decided it was best to keep a healthy distance.

“So...what’s your request?” I asked coldly.

The young man sucked in a big breath, and then, with fire in his eyes, said, “Have se—”

I went back to my room.



“No, listen, earlier, that was just one of those things. A figure of speech, or, no, look! You didn’t give me a chance to finish! I don’t really have anything to feel guilty about! Come on, I’m begging you! Please listen to my story!”

I could tell from the pounding on my door that the slender young man was out in the hallway.

I slid the chain into place on the door and opened it just the tiniest bit to glare at him. “...You’re bothering me. Please, go back to where you came from.”

“...Sorry, but I lost my place of residence...which means I don’t have a home to return to!”

“Then don’t go home. Return to the earth.”

“So...you’re telling me to die...”

“All right then, I’m done now.”

“Ah! Wait a second! Wait, please! Listen to my story!” He stuck his hands in the door and forced the conversation to continue. “...Until you lend an ear to my tale, I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s up to you, I guess. I can’t be held responsible for what the door does to your hands, though...”

“Huh?”

“Okay!”

Heave!

The young man's hands, it turns out, were no match for the door. His wails of agony filled the corridor of the high-class hotel. I was worried that other guests might come out to investigate.

"...Tch. Were you trying to get me to call for help? Well, you've made one little mistake...! You and I are the only ones staying on the top floor of this high-class hotel! Which means that no matter how loud I scream, no help is coming! Accept it, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha..."

"I see."

"It's because I made a special request with the hotel proprietor so that I could stay in a room next to a cute girl. I also bought out all the other rooms while I was at it, so there are no people staying in any of them."

"That is...wow..."

That's really creepy...

"Leaving that aside, won't you please just listen to what I have to say? I want to dispel the earlier misunderstanding."

"Forget about earlier. You're acting like a real creep right now!"

"It's fine, that's not a problem."

"How could that be anything *but* a problem?"

"No, you see, there's a good reason why I've been so desperate thus far. I promise you, if you give me a chance to explain my situation, I'm sure you'll be excited to have me as your lover—"

Heave!

"Aaaaaaaaahhh!"

The young man wisely decided it would be best to share the tragic story of his infernal birth from the other side of the door.

What followed was the sad tale of a young man born into a race of demons...I guess.

Sex demons.

The generic name for a race of demons with handsome faces and abundantly

beautiful bodies. Their outward appearance doesn't differ from humans much, except for the bat-like wings growing from their backs. The most prominent sex demons are the succubi, who visit men in their dreams and sap their life energy. They skillfully blend into human society, and I'd even heard that, in certain places, succubi operate special adult-oriented businesses, making a living by providing obscene fantasies. The city I was currently staying in happened to be one of those places.

The troubled young man belonged to the relatively rare male species of the sex demon race. He was an incubus.

His basic nature was no different from that of a succubus. Incubi survived by bringing women lewd dreams and taking some of their life essence in return. Apparently, that was all there was to it.

However...

"It's no goooooood! Nobody wants what I'm selling. I can't even *give* it away. I'm so unpopular, I seriously want to just die already."

"Huh..."

He gave an example. A succubus could head out into town and entice a man with cheap acting, coming onto him with lines like, "Hey there, mister. Wanna go take a little break in that hotel over there? I'll show you wonderful dreams ♥" or "I'm just a little tired...♥" or "Tonight...I don't wanna go home...♥" Then she would take the man she had snared to a succubus-run hotel and lie next to him smoking a cigarette while lazily showing the sleeping man lascivious dreams. Upon waking, the man would say "Heh-heh-heh...that was the best..." or something, and leave her a large sum of money. This was apparently a very profitable business model for the succubi, but things didn't go the same way for this incubus.

First, he would go out into town.

"Hey, hey! You there, miss! Wanna have some dirty dreams...with me?"

"Huh? Gross."

"....."

He couldn't even get past the initial contact. In other words, he wasn't even standing at the starting line.

That was not a surprise.

"That kind of approach doesn't work as well on women. Plus, it's pretty obvious from your appearance that you're an incubus."

Since the succubi were running hotels and so on, the existence of sex demons must have been fairly well known around here. So naturally, any woman who saw an incubus approach her would know exactly what he was after.

Of course, that would put any woman on her guard. They can probably tell he's only after their bodies. That's obviously why he can't seduce any of them.

"That's right... That's why I'm in such a bind. I said this at the beginning, but even though I was born like this, I've never held a girl in my arms. I'm a sex demon, but I've never managed to do a single thing that a sex demon should do."

"Guess not."

"I'm a sex demon...and a virgin. I'm a virgin sex demon."

"Aren't you ashamed?"

"Of course, I am... Can you imagine how it feels to be a grown-up demon who's never given anyone lewd dreams...?"

"No, that's not what I meant..."

What I meant was, aren't you ashamed of your whining...?

"So now that you've heard my story"—he turned his handsome face toward me—"won't you let me show you some lewd dreams?" But the way he delivered the line wasn't handsome at all. It was nasty, in fact.

"You've asked me that sort of question many times already. My answer is still no."

"...No matter what? If you don't want the dreams, I can do stuff with your body, too."

"That's even worse."

“Wait, but—”

“No way.”

“.....”

“No. Way.”

“.....”

He looked heartbroken. There was no room to argue with my adamant rejection.

“...That’s what I thought... There’s no way... So there’s really nothing I can do but die, huh...? I’m trash, there’s no value in me living...”

Honestly, after listening to you, I’m inclined to agree.

...I wanted to say that, but I stifled the urge to do so, and answered him with a long, heavy sigh.

It wasn’t too late to extricate myself from this whole situation, but I was also getting the sense that it might be dangerous to leave someone so mentally unstable alone... I was worried that he might very well attack the next woman he encountered.

And so...

“...I can’t accept your proposal, and I have no intention of ever changing my mind. If I did, I think I’d consider ending it all myself, but... Instead, how about I give you a little advice?”

After a moment’s hesitation, I made a proposal of my own.

The young man’s difficulties with women clearly stemmed from a complete lack of experience. Of course he didn’t know how to approach women—he’d never even spoken with a woman before, not really. Fortunately, his inexperience could be papered over somewhat by the proper education.

Therefore, in order to prevent him from endangering any more women—

“How about if I teach you just what a woman’s heart is made of?” I offered. “With my help, you’ll be pulling girls in no time...,” I whispered to him, just like a little devil.

“Teach me the secrets of a woman’s heart, you say? Can you really do such a thing?”

“What are you talking about? For your information, I know so much about what women want that I’ve been called a regular love guru.”

“Ah, you are familiar with the ways of a woman’s heart even though you are a woman yourself... So does that mean...you prefer women to men?”

Heave!

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!”

A wail of unbridled agony echoed down the corridor and throughout the highest floor of the hotel.



We went for a walk around town.

“Right, so let’s assume that the reason you’re a failure with women is a basic lack of experience. That seems about right.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“In order to actually be popular, I think first you have to learn how to interact with women, and to do that you need to understand what women are like... without tripping over yourself trying to win their affection, of course.”

“Sure.”

“But because you’re an incubus, you can’t help yourself. You’re too forward, and it’s really off-putting.”

“That makes sense.”

“So conversely, if you weren’t an incubus, you wouldn’t have so much trouble talking to women, right?”

“I guess you have a point...”

“Okay, so go and talk to a girl now. And this time, you won’t mess up, because you won’t be an incubus.”

“.....”

“What’s wrong? Are you gonna chicken out?”

“...No, um...”

“It’s all right, don’t worry. There isn’t a woman alive who would suspect anything is off about you. Come on, show a little backbone.”

“Um, it’s not a matter of courage, just...”

“Come on now, don’t be modest. You look great!”

“About that... What’s with this getup anyway?”

The incubus glanced down at his own appearance and frowned. He wore a very skeptical expression. It was as if the guy who had previously been isolated on the other side of the door from me had been reborn as a completely different person.

The man with the handsome features now had sleek, long hair, and he was wearing women’s clothing, a skirt, and a blouse. He still had bat wings growing from his back, but no one who saw them would ever think he was an incubus.

To put it clearly and concisely...

“You’re a succubus.”

That is to say, an incubus in a succubus costume.

“What the heck?! Why?! Why do I have to pretend to be a succubus?!”

The incubus was indignant. The people walking past us did a double take because of the manly voice coming from such a girlie-looking girl.

“You still don’t get it? Every time you meet a woman, all you can think about is trying to sleep with her. Your vulgar attitude is what’s causing you to fail.

“This is a necessary step,” I soothed him confidently. “What you need is experience interacting with women, am I right?”

“Are you right? No way! Even if I do get friendly with a woman, in this getup, there’s no point, is there?! I mean, I just look like a regular old pervert, don’t I?!”

“Then clearly it suits you.”

“That’s going too far!”

“Now hold on. I never said a single word about ‘getting friendly’ while you’re dressed up like that.” I shook my head in exasperation. “Don’t you get it? Pretending to be a woman will give you the chance to really get to know other women. And besides, nobody ever has to find out that you’re an incubus. Think of this as practice. If you want to be a successful incubus, you’ve got to learn to get comfortable around women.”

“...In other words, you’re saying that I’ll have an easier time talking to women dressed like this? But who exactly am I supposed to talk to?”

“Can’t you just sort of call out to people walking down the street?”

“That’d never work...”

“Hmm? It’s surprisingly easy, you know?”

I went over to the curb and quickly scanned the street. I could see every person coming and going down the main avenue. There were couples walking close together, groups of girls walking slowly, side by side, and people out shopping alone.

.....

I glanced at the skeptical incubus. “All right, I’ll give you a model to follow,” I said, and walked off.

Straight ahead of me was a plain-looking woman who was clearly out shopping by herself.

I decided to aim for her, and walked directly toward her, then—

“Ah! I’m sorry!”

—ran right into her.

I really went for it, and I fell on my backside, as did she. The fruit that she must have just bought went flying out of her bag, rolling out into the middle of the road.

Well, it was just a simple accident.

“I-I’m sorry! I wasn’t looking where I was going...” I put on a big show of being

flustered and panicked, as I gathered up the fruit that had fallen on the ground.

“N-no, it was my fault...” The other woman was also flustered and confused.

Both of us muttered apology after apology as we gathered up the fallen fruit, and then when everything was neatly picked back up, we bowed to each other and went our separate ways.

“So, basically something like that.”

I returned to where the incubus was waiting and looked up at him.

“Wait...what? You just ran into her.” He was glaring at me with narrowed eyes.

My, my. Does he really think that I bumped into her just so I could pick her fruit back up?

“Take a look at this.”

I produced a single key from my pocket.

It was a key to the high-class hotel I was currently staying in.

“...What about it?”

“That was a demonstration, so I didn’t do anything with it, but...supposing she had happened to take this with her by mistake, what then?”

“.....?”

Apparently, the incubus wasn’t very bright.

“Say that earlier, when I ran into her, I had secretly slipped this key into that woman’s bag. If I did that, what do you think the result would be?”

“If you... Well, she’d probably return the key to the hotel. Any normal person would.”

“That’s right. That’s exactly right. She would go out of her way to come to my hotel.” I nodded. “After that, it’s easy. You lie in wait at the hotel and meet her again. And then you make up some reason, like ‘as thanks for bringing my key back’ or something, and invite her out to dinner. If you were still an incubus, she would probably be on her guard, but now that you’re a succubus, she ought to see nothing wrong with accepting your invitation. And then you enjoy a nice

meal and practice talking with a woman.”

And then maybe, after you get some experience, you can start thinking about your job as an incubus...

“I see... This way I can easily get to know women, huh...?! You’re amazing, Miss Witch! That’s brilliant, to come up with this method!”

“Oh-hoh-hoh, I know, I know.”

“Really, it was a very clever idea, but you know, normally I just do a little bit of this—”

Heave!

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”



It must have been about a week after that.

I didn’t really have anything left to do in the city, so I packed my bags and checked out of the hotel.

Ever since our outing together, the incubus staying in the room next door had apparently been working on spending time with women, disguised as a succubus, and it seemed to be going fairly well. Every day, women visited his room one after another, and then went out somewhere together with him.

It seemed like the incubus had also grown comfortable playing the part of a succubus. He’d even started speaking in a more feminine way, just like the other women. I’d even heard him chatting about a new sweets shop on the main street. I was confident that the day when he could finally flourish as an incubus could not be far off.

I was pondering this as I walked down the city’s main avenue at night.

“Hey handsome! How ’bout it? You wanna have some sweet dreams with me?”

“Sweetie, you look tired, huh? Why don’t we go get some rest?”

“Wow, what a dreamy gentleman you are! Whaddaya say? How about choosing me to keep you company tonight?”

The succubi were gathered along the main avenue that ran all the way to the city gates. They called out to the lonely men walking alone down the road, leering at them with lascivious eyes, then disappeared into hotels with them arm in arm. It was plain to see that the city's nightlife was anything but wholesome.

“.....”

By the way—

I came to a stop in front of a certain hotel.

“...Oh-hoh, now which man shall I have tonight...?”

I didn't particularly have an interest in the businesses run by the succubi, but the succubus standing there in front of this shop, evaluating the men who passed by, looked familiar to me.

No, I had definitely seen her before.

What the heck?

It was obviously...

“...What the heck are you doing, Mr. Incubus?”

For some reason, the incubus, a male sex demon, was mixed in among the females, serving customers at the succubi-run establishment.

I don't understand the meaning of this. I don't understand at all.

When I recognized him, the incubus said, “Goodness! If it isn't the witch! Long time no see, sweetie.” His face lit up brightly.

...Who is this person?

“Thank you ever so much for before. With your help, I've finally become the sex demon I was always meant to be.”

“...Huh.”

“And while I was spending time with women, pretending to be a girl, I thought, ‘Wait, I'm crazy cute just as I am, aren't I...?’ and look at me now!”

“Huh...”

Well, that certainly is an appealing look, but...

Ignoring my astonishment, he launched into a rapid-fire explanation. “And then, you know what I did next? I went to lunch with the other girls plenty of times, right?” His eyes sparkled. “And there, I...well...” Then, just as quickly, his eyes started to cloud up instead. “I witnessed all the nasty things about women...and I saw that they’re really...well, they’re much nastier creatures than I expected... Women are...” The light had already disappeared entirely from his eyes. “They get jealous easily, and they’ll be friendly to your face but bad-mouth you nonstop behind your back, and their sex talk is really vulgar, but then they feign complete innocence in front of men, and they all have one-sided conversations where they just talk about what they want and don’t listen... It’s like women are completely different people when they’re with other women, versus when they’re with men...”

“Uh-huh...”

I mean, sure, I can’t argue that there are some women like that, but...

“Seriously...they’re way nastier than how I imagined girls to be...much worse than I ever thought...”

The incubus in girls’ clothing wore a dark expression, as if under a gloomy shadow. It was obvious that pretending to be a woman had made him feel closer to other women, and it was only natural that the way the other women had reacted to a person they’d perceived as someone of the same sex had been very different from the way they handled people of the opposite sex, but... Apparently he’d taken away the wrong lessons from the experience. It had been a blind spot in the plan, all right.

But a moment later, the light returned to his eyes. “And then, you know, I had a thought! The women I had imagined were nothing like these creatures! Right?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Girls! Girls are more...clean! And nice-smelling! And soft! And they make your heart pound! That’s how they should be!”

“Uh-huh...”

“And so, I thought! That’s it! I should become my ideal woman! Right?”

“Ah, I see... I mean, what?”

“That’s why I’m hanging out with the succubi. I’ve decided to become my ideal woman. Whaddaya think?”

“What do I think? I don’t know how to... Sorry, but I’m not really following.”

“Oh, pooh. It’s simple! I’m gonna be the queen of the succubi.”

Oh, you are? No wait, what are you talking about?

But she (?) ignored me in my astonishment and chuckled knowingly as she placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you, Miss Witch. You really opened my eyes.”



Opened your eyes...to a new gender identity...?

“Well...um...the most important thing is that you’re happy...”

“By the way, how about it? If you’re free, wanna go a round?” The sex demon jerked a thumb back toward the hotel. “These days, I’m fine with either men or women!”

“I can’t say the same for myself, so I’m afraid I shall have to decline.”

“Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh... My, my. You’ll regret it! One of these days, I’m gonna be the best of the best! The number one sex demon!”

Then the lady incubus disappeared into the night, laughing loudly.

I couldn’t help but feel like I had somehow created a wild new breed of sex demon.

A few days later, I happened to overhear a rumor. Apparently, in a certain nearby city, an incubus had appeared who was even more popular than the succubi.

They were a rare creature in this world. People said the incubus was indeed an incubus, but dressed in women’s clothing, and—typical of incubi—would seduce anyone, whether they were a man or woman. It was wild.

I even heard that the men who lived there had already developed a peculiar saying: “There’s no way that such a cute succubus could be a girl.” Obviously, there was a new queen of the night trade.

What’s more, the succubi who had been put out of work by the new competition formed a union in protest, and were currently on the hunt for the witch who was responsible for creating their latest rival.

And they all lived happily ever after.

.....

Well, not exactly...



CHAPTER 8

Seven Days of Ariadne

[Day Six Afternoon]

It was a late summer afternoon, and a cool breeze blew through the air.

Two students entered a lecture hall of Latorita State University.

One of them was a girl wearing a black blazer. Her long, silken hair was the color of ash. Her eyes were lapis. She was staring straight at the other side of the lecture hall.

Who on earth could this ordinary university student be?

That's right, she's me.

"Are you nervous, Ariadne?"

There was another female student beside me.

She wore a red blazer and a black skirt. Her red hair was tied into two pigtails behind her head. She gazed over at me with striking blue eyes.

"Hmm? Huh? Do I need to be nervous?"

I would have appreciated it if she'd taken the situation a bit more seriously, but despite the high stakes, she seemed utterly unbothered.

I turned a reproachful gaze on the girl. "The two of us were summoned here together, you know. It would be prudent to assume that there's something going on."

But Ariadne was just as oblivious as always. "We don't know that! Maybe they're having trouble with something and want us to lend them a hand. This could be our chance, right Elaina?"

"That's obviously not the look of someone who wants our help."

I pointed.

Across the lecture hall from us was a girl who had clearly been waiting for us. She was wearing the same sort of blazer that Ariadne had, as well as a long

black cloak over that. Her dark red hair was tied into a single ponytail on the side of her head, and she looked down at us with a blank expression. And she stood stock-still, like a mannequin.

As she stared at the girl standing across the lecture hall from us, Ariadne narrowed her eyes slightly. Her gaze was kind yet melancholy.

“So, what was your reason for summoning us?” Ariadne asked the other student. She was straight to the point, or maybe tactlessly frank, but the girl on the other side of the hall simply shook her head.

“I cannot tell you.”

Something in the girl’s voice—in Sara’s voice—made me shiver.

“How cold...” Ariadne shrugged, clearly already out of patience.

What kind of answer is “I cannot tell you” anyway?

Suddenly, the icy click of high heels echoed through the hall.

“She is not the one who summoned you.”

A woman calmly appeared before us, her hair fluttering glamorously behind her like young spring grass swaying in the wind. Her commanding presence froze me in my tracks as she confidently strode toward us.

A chill went up my spine.

Finally, the woman came to a stop beside Sara. “I knew there were some little mice sniffing around our business, but... It was you two, hmm? How unfortunate. How very, very unfortunate...” Her cold words hit us like an icy torrent.

I had heard about this woman; specifically that she was truly an academic elite, that she’d been with the university since its founding, that she was everyone’s favorite choice for next headmaster, and that she was young (she was only in her thirties). She was the brilliant and lovely Miss Vivian.

And I’m sure she enjoyed all that attention (though I’m not quite sure what her age had to do with anything).

Beside me, Ariadne said, “No way. Seriously? Looks like we’ve been found

out, Elaina..." Somehow, she still didn't sound all that concerned.

"...Actually, I was pretty sure we were never going to get away with it," I replied with a sigh.

If I was being honest, the two of us had probably seemed pretty suspicious these past few days, as we'd attempted to investigate Vivian's work. Really, if I were in her position, I would have had us captured and interrogated already.

On the other hand, Vivian was pretty suspicious herself. Really, anyone else in my position would have already made a hasty retreat.

"I knew as soon as I began looking into you. The student roster made it obvious. There are no students named Elaina or Ariadne enrolled at this institution." She pointed her wand at us and demanded, "Tell me who you are. Why are you trying to get in my way?"

I snorted through my nose, "Did the student roster also tell you that we would answer honestly if you threatened us?"

"...I suppose we should include information like that from now on."

Then she waved her wand.

Immediately, the floor of the lecture hall split apart, and the crack ran up the door right behind us. We only grasped that it had been blown apart by a preposterously strong gust of wind when a moment later that gale blew past us and sent our uniform skirts fluttering.

I see, so she wants to boast about her own power.

Either that, or she's trying to cut off our retreat by destroying the door.

"It's in your own best interests to answer honestly," Sara said, standing next to Vivian. "The professor doesn't particularly *want* to kill you..."

I'm sure she meant it as a warning.

"Sara, it's no use," Vivian replied. "If I don't hurt them a little bit, those two definitely won't give me any answers. They don't seem particularly bright, after all."

I'm sure she was trying to provoke us.

But we weren't the type to readily take the bait.

However...

"We came here to end this foolish charade. Release Sara from your spell."

I held my wand at the ready. If my opponent wanted trouble, I was prepared to give it to her.

"Why, I'm not under her spell," Sara replied. "I only wanted to study magic under her peerless tutelage."

But even as she spoke, I could see that her eyes were glazed over.

The girl loyally obeyed everything the professor said without the slightest hesitation or any concern for right and wrong. The professor had to have been manipulating her somehow. I was certain.

"Are you planning on taking me down all by yourself? Just you?" Vivian's eyes flicked back and forth between me and Ariadne. "After all, Ariadne over there can't use magic, right? That's why I went out of my way to look after her. I thought I could make her into a mage like I did with Sara."

"I don't need you to do that!" Ariadne spat. "I'm perfectly happy even without the ability to use magic!" She took a step behind me. "So please protect me, okay Elaina?"

".....Um, sure."

I couldn't tell if she was cool or lame.

In any case, I readied my wand as I moved to protect her.

I was up against a gifted instructor with years of magical experience. This was definitely no time to let my guard down.

"Happy without magic...?" Vivian's expression grew cloudy, and she looked like she was gathering power into her hands. "Give me a break! The lives of people who can't use magic are meaningless because magic is everything!"

And then, she waved her wand again.



*

[Day Three Afternoon]

Bang!

An earsplitting sound dragged my awareness back to the present.

Apparently, I had been spacing out. When I shifted my gaze from the classroom window to the teacher's desk, I saw the middle-aged instructor making a sour face.

The classroom was utterly silent, almost as if speaking was prohibited.

Looking around, I saw students sitting at desks arranged in a half-circle around the teacher's desk. There were students who were shrinking in fear, students who were desperately jotting down the words written on the blackboard, and students who were staring at the instructor with cold, hostile eyes.

"You there! What's your name?" The instructor's gaze seized on me sharply.

"Elaina," I answered with a yawn.

"All right. Elaina. You've been staring out the window ever since class started! Perhaps you think my lessons are boring?"

The middle-aged teacher had her hands on her hips and her eyebrows raised. Scrawled on the blackboard behind her were lists of ingredients and steps for potion-making, winding on and on like a single sprawling recipe.

"If you want to become a witch's apprentice, this class is compulsory, you know! Don't you think you ought to pay attention?"

That was the situation.

Latorita State University was a coeducational facility where half the students were mages, and this class was an important one for the those aiming to become witch's apprentices. The material it covered was sure to appear on the apprenticeship exams.

So, in short, this was all familiar ground.

"...I'm sorry. I'll pay attention."

I gave a half-hearted apology.

It may have been boring, but I really hadn't been paying attention.

"You won't get off that easily! As punishment, come solve this problem! If you can't solve it, I'll make you retake my class! Come now, stand up!" The teacher slapped her wand against the blackboard. She seemed to want to shame her troublesome student into behaving better.

The wand pointed to a recipe for a sleeping potion. The column for the ingredients had been left blank. She seemed to want me to fill in the missing part of the recipe.

A challenging problem.

I stood up.

"First, take stalks of sleeping grass that you have dried for ten days and grind them into a powder. Add a bit of wool pulled from the pelt of a sleeping sheep. Mix it in clean water and infuse it with magical energy. Then—" It took me about thirty more seconds to explain the ingredients and the method for making the potion.

"....."

The instructor just looked at me with a vexed expression, not saying whether I was right or wrong, then struck the blackboard again. "...All right, this one?"

This time she was pointing to an isolated list of ingredients.

"With those ingredients, you could make a paralyzing potion."

"...And this one?"

"That's a potion to temporarily transform someone into a mouse. If you're going to make that..." I fluently spouted off the recipe.

I suppose the teacher was probably trying to bully me, but I answered every one of her questions.

Finally, wearing a bitter expression, the middle-aged instructor said simply, "You may sit. Never look bored in my classroom again."

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

“...What is it?”

“That recipe there... The ingredients are incorrect. And there’s a problem with the procedure, too.”

“.....”

After enjoying my modest revenge, eye for an eye and all, I sat back in my chair. The classroom was very, very quiet. Or maybe I simply stopped listening. That’s more likely, now that I think about it.



I had taken a break from my travels and, for a number of reasons, I was undercover as a student at Latorita State University.

Consequently, I was dressed differently today than I usually was. I was wearing a school uniform with a blazer and long cloak. It had been several years since I had put on a uniform, and I was anxious that it might not suit me, but I have to say, it looked surprisingly good. Just my opinion.

“Elaina! What are you taking for your next class? If you want, maybe you could take history of magic with me—”

“Huh? Elaina’s taking math class with me!”

“No, she’s taking philosophy with me!”

After class, several students stopped me as I tried to leave the room.

Only two days had passed since I had gone undercover at this university, but apparently, I’d already left quite the impression.

The original plan had been to clandestinely infiltrate the university and carry out a stealthy rescue, but... I seemed to be attracting a lot of attention. It could be a problem.

I suppose my charismatic personality is winning people’s adoration.

“Elaina really knows how to shut down those irritating teachers.”

“Yeah, she’s handy.”

“And that’s why she’s coming to my philosophy class.”

“No way! She’s taking magic history.”

“Nope, math!”

“.....”

Apparently, it wasn't my charisma at all. People just thought I was useful to have around.

“Excuse me. I have to go see someone...” I flatly refused all the girls' invitations and left the classroom.

At Latorita State University, students could choose to attend different classes every day. This made it easy for *the two of us* to blend into the student body. *Security on this campus is far too lax*, I thought.

In any case, because of the circumstances that brought me here, I had to blend in with the university crowd. It would probably be best not to get too involved with other people.

I walked toward the central courtyard. I'd made a promise to meet someone there between classes. But...

“...So you see? It won't look good if you lose a button at a critical moment, right? If you don't use this free time to fix it, you'll end up regretting it, you know. You've got to be more careful! And you there! Your hair is in your eyes, isn't it? That's dangerous. Use this hairpin. Ah! And you, what's with that short skirt? It's indecent! Girls should be more modest. Unfold your skirt back to how it should be! A skirt that comes to the knees is just right.”

For some reason, a crowd of girls had formed in the courtyard, and there was some kind of commotion brewing. In the center of the crowd was a girl with red hair, the color of autumn leaves, done up into two pigtails on the sides of her head. She was dressed in a red blazer and a black skirt. She was one of the ordinary students, who didn't study magic.

She was busily mingling with the other girls, and as she joked around, they kept shrieking in delight.

“Whew... You can just call me Big Sister.”

She brushed back some stray hairs as she delivered this strange line.

.....

“What are you doing, Ariadne?”

“Oh, Elaina. You’re late.” Ariadne casually waved hello to me. At the same time, I received many hostile stares from the girls hanging around her. “Sorry, everyone,” Ariadne said to the crowd. “I’ve got a previous engagement with this girl. I can’t go with you to the next class.” She gave the group a big wink and trotted over to where I was standing. When she reached me, Ariadne grabbed hold of my arm.

.....

It took less than a second for the looks in her followers’ eyes to turn murderous.

“Would you mind not pouring fuel on that particular fire?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“You must be totally oblivious...”

We walked side by side out of the courtyard, onlookers staring daggers at us the whole way. I had made a promise to take the next class with Ariadne.

“...Actually, you know, you were the one who said that we should try not to stand out because we’re in the middle of a covert operation, right Ariadne? You’re attracting quite a lot of attention, don’t you think? Just what are you up to?”

I cast a scowling look at Ariadne as we walked down the hallway, but she just laughed, “Ah, did I really say that?” She continued, “As long as we’re on the subject, wasn’t it kind of conspicuous for you to harass a teacher in class, Elaina? I heard about that.”

“...Word travels fast.”

“Well, it’s not like I don’t know what I’m doing. If I surround myself with many different people, all sorts of things will make their way to my ears.”

“So have you gathered any secret intelligence on Vivian?”

“Mmm... Not even the tiniest little bit. You?”

“Not even the tiniest little bit.”

“That’s too bad.” Ariadne shrugged.

“It seems like the students who side with Vivian are all pretty tight-lipped, huh?” I said. “Even when I asked about her, most of them wouldn’t give me any answer other than that she’s a ‘good teacher.’”

“Outwardly, that is—inwardly, they must know what she’s up to, right?”

Ariadne came to a quick stop. We had arrived at a classroom at the end of the hall. The class was already almost full. This was where Vivian taught combat magic.

“...That girl, there!”

Standing bolt upright in the doorway, I jabbed Ariadne with my elbow, and pointed.

Because sitting inside was Sara, the girl we had been searching for.



“The spells that I will be teaching you all today are especially versatile spells for use in battle. I am talking, of course, about wind magic. Wind magic is, as the name suggests, a branch of magic in which you take control of the wind and direct its power. The technique’s true potential lies in the inherent invisibility of its effects. That makes it very difficult to evade or counter. It’s an incredibly versatile branch of magic that can of course be used in open battle, but is also practical for covert actions.”

I felt a little twinge of nerves at the word “covert.”

We’re okay, right...? We haven’t been found out?

Indifferent to my anxiety, Vivian continued the lecture. “Now then, allow me to demonstrate.” She stood at the lectern, waving her wand and explaining the spells’ uses and how to best direct one’s magical energy. Her hair, the color of new leaves, fluttered smoothly as she moved.

“Anyway, we have to find a way to rescue Sara...” Ariadne was staring intently at Vivian—actually, she was scowling as she spoke. “Maybe we can convince Vivian to let Sara go.”

“She really doesn’t look like the kind of person who will listen to a polite

request.”

I was sure that there were more students like Sara who had fallen under Vivian’s spell. It was even possible that she had already taken control of most of the student body. I didn’t think that approaching her directly would get us anywhere.

“Ah...! I just had a great idea!” Ariadne suddenly clapped her hands together, but at least had the wherewithal to keep her voice to an excited whisper. “You should attack her, Elaina!”

“...And after I attack her, then what?”

“Heh-heh...then...well...you know how it goes. I’ll improvise something amazing.”

“Maybe you could come up with a more...substantial plan.”

“Huh? But it’s a great idea, isn’t it? Come on, Elaina, let’s do it!”

“No way.”

Even supposing I was able to get the upper hand, I couldn’t see any outcome aside from Vivian’s supporters ganging up on us.

“Ah, a momentary digression,” Vivian said from the lectern. “How many students here are from the non-magical program? Raise your hands.” Vivian raised her hand and prompted the students to raise theirs.

Around the classroom, hands went up. Beside me, Ariadne also obediently raised her hand. About half of the students were mages like me, and just stared at the lectern, since the question had nothing to do with us. Sara did the same.

I see, so this is a class on spells to use in battle, but apparently it’s open to non-mages.

“Okay, about half the class,” Vivian continued. “Well, do not assume that this course has nothing to offer you just because you cannot use magic. We will also be covering ways to defend against various attack spells, so I encourage all of you to treat this subject with the utmost seriousness.”

Vivian’s eyes briefly seized on Ariadne.

The difference between the non-magical students and the magical students was obvious. The magical students wore cloaks over their blazers, like Sara and I currently had on. The division should have been clear without asking everyone to raise their hands. It was possible that Vivian had been making a point about our hushed conversation being too loud.

“Well then, to return to the lecture.”

After that, the lesson resumed as if nothing had happened.

If she was more like the middle-aged instructor from earlier, things probably would have gone the way Ariadne wanted them to...

“I think we were making a little too much noise,” I whispered, as I gripped my pen and paper. “Well, as far as our rescue is concerned, we have plenty of options besides a direct attack. Just leave it to me.”

My pen slid smoothly over the page for a few seconds. Then I folded the paper into a small parcel.

After it was done, I tapped the girl sitting in front of me on the shoulder and handed her the note. “Would you pass this to the girl in front of you with the brown hair?”

Two seats in front of me I could see the back of a female student who, as I said, had glossy, dyed brown hair tied up into a single bunch on the side of her head. It was the girl Ariadne wanted to rescue—Sara.

This was my strategy:

Make contact with Sara and ask her to arrange a meeting with Vivian.

My note asked, *Are you free after class? If you don't mind, there's something I'd like to discuss with you.*

The first step was to get her to agree to meet.

This is truly the safest option. There's no way this strategy can fail.

However...

The girl in the seat in front of me let out a soft chuckle, “Huh, what's this? A love letter?” She tapped Sara on the back, then handed her the note. “Here's a

love letter from the girl behind me,” she blurted.

She had obviously misread the situation, and mistakenly assumed that Sara and I already had some sort of relationship.

“.....”

Consequently, when Sara turned around and took the note, she narrowed her blue eyes at me briefly. Then she took up her pen, looking very, very annoyed, scratched something on the paper, and practically hurled it back at the girl between us.

“Wow, I guess she’s the hot-and-cold type, huh?” the girl remarked as she handed the note back to me.

There was just one thing written on it.

Sorry, not interested.

.....

“That reminds me. It’s a campus tradition for lovers to exchange little notes in class...” Ariadne was peering at the paper from beside me.

“And you couldn’t tell me that beforehand?”

“Oh, I thought you knew.”

“.....”

“But this is our chance, Elaina. Gimme.” Ariadne snatched the pen from my hand and wrote on the paper again. “If we use this opportunity to make friends with Sara, we might be able to get her out from under Vivian’s control.”

She wrote:

Sorryyy! My friend can be weird (whoops), but she didn’t mean anything bad. We just want to be your friends (ha-ha)! I wanna know more about you, Sara!

.....

I gave Ariadne an incredulous look as she confidently handed me the note.

It came straight back to us.

Gross, was the only reply.

“She really doesn’t like us...”

“It’s because she’s so cold...”

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s the problem.” It was becoming clear that I would have to figure this one out on my own. “Geez. Give me that.”

I wrote, *We want to be your friends, Sara. Please, just talk to us.*

I’m busy.

Would that be because you’re assisting Miss Vivian?

Why should I answer that?

Well, what do you think of Miss Vivian, anyway?

You’re hitting on me, but you only want to talk about another woman. I don’t get you.

Trust me, the feeling’s mutual...

We exchanged notes for a little while longer, but to no avail. By the time class was over we had failed to make even the slightest bit of progress.

Vivian sure was a popular teacher, there could be no doubt about it. The moment that class was over, the students crowded around her, buzzing with enthusiasm.

“I thought we could make direct contact after class, but...now it seems like that’s never gonna happen.”

“Yeah, it seems that way.”

A wall of people had formed. Fighting our way through to the middle seemed next to impossible.

“What should we do?”

“...Looks like our best chance of getting to Vivian is through Sara.” I had a sudden realization. “Though I think Sara is also part of the crowd.”

There was Sara, in the center of the mob, staring at Vivian with sparkling eyes. She looked just like a maiden in love. Trying to talk to Sara was not going to be any easier than approaching Vivian herself.

“*Tch...* What a pain. How on earth are we supposed to get to Vivian?” Ariadne was starting to sound desperate.

“You two,” came a voice from inside the crowd. “You there.”

The eyes of the students turned on us, and then we realized that Vivian was staring directly at us.

She walked straight at us, parting the wall of students in her wake. Suddenly, she was standing right in front of us, smiling broadly.

“Can the two of you spare a moment right now?” she asked. “I was wondering if I could have just a bit of your time to help me with some very important *research*.”

Research... That was the word Vivian had used when she had taken Sara away.

So possibly, helping with her research would mean becoming subject to Vivian’s control.

This wasn’t part of any plan of ours. She had caught us by surprise.

“...So what should we do if she’s the one who initiates contact?” Ariadne whispered quietly to me.

“I think you ought to improvise something,” I whispered back curtly.

[One Month Earlier Afternoon]

Angry voices echoed from the windows of the bakery that faced out onto the main avenue. A customer who was about to enter the shop turned on her heel, sensing the dangerous atmosphere emanating from the establishment, and wisely hurried away.

Beyond the quivering, trembling glass stood a mother and daughter glaring at each other, and no one else.

“...Say that one more time.” The mother lowered her voice. She had seen the customer run away. “Do you even know what you’re saying?”

The daughter answered her, practically spitting out the words. “I said I’m leaving home to help Professor Vivian with her research. From now on, I’m going to live at the professor’s house. I won’t be back for several years.”

She spoke with total composure. The girl was wearing a red blazer and shouldering a large, heavy-looking bag. She sighed.

Her mother just stared at her, at a loss. “You’re set to inherit our shop. But instead you’re saying you’re going to live with some teacher doing...what, exactly?”

“Nothing! Or anything! Whatever I want! Listen, don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not really asking for your permission, Mom. I’m telling you. I’m going to learn magic from the professor.”

The daughter made this decisive assertion.

She was a student at Latorita State University, where mages accounted for about half of the student population. She yearned to be one of them because she was constantly surrounded by the very thing she desired most.

The students who graduated from that school went on to flourish in important positions around the city. On the other hand, when it came to students, like this girl, who couldn’t use magic...well, most of them had very few prospects after graduation. Everyone could see that there was a big divide in the student body.

“...You’ve been acting strange lately, you know that? Ever since you started going to that school...no, ever since you met that Professor Vivian... But you’re doing just fine without magic, aren’t you...? And if you inherit the shop—”

“Don’t feed me that nonsense,” the daughter interrupted. “I want to become a mage. So, Mother...I won’t be home for a while.”

She turned on her heel and left the shop without looking back.

Ever since she had started studying at the university, the girl had changed. Maybe it was the new environment, or maybe it was the people she’d met. But she’d become distant, and she’d closed herself off from her mother. The girl didn’t help around the shop anymore. And she had stopped smiling like she used to.

The mother had meant for the shop to be her daughter’s legacy. She’d sent the girl to the university to learn about the world, believing that a successful business needed a well-connected proprietor. But as soon as school had

started, the girl had forgotten all about the little shop.

In this way, the daughter—Sara—left her mother’s house, saying she was never coming back.

The following day, Sara transferred from the normal course into the magic program.

[Day Three Night]

“What do you think?”

The bakery on the main avenue of town had quite a special look to it. It even had a space for customers to eat inside. In fact, you could have easily called it a bread-centric café, rather than a simple bakery. They even had free coffee for customers who chose to dine in.

“I think this is the greatest! Place! Ever!”

I was pretty excited by this avant-garde bakery.

Ariadne narrowed her eyes at me. “I wasn’t asking for your impression of the store, you know.”

Oh, did I misunderstand?

“...What do I think about Vivian’s proposal, you mean?” I bowed slightly as I accepted a cup of coffee from the shopkeeper, then took a sip.

Ariadne nodded sharply. “Yeah, I think it stinks.”

“...Well, I think it’s got a lovely fragrance.”

“I wasn’t asking for your impression of the coffee, you know.”

“.....”

I set my cup down. “Fine. Honestly, I think it’s a trap. It seems way too convenient.”

“I have to agree...but, it’s also definitely our best shot at getting to her. We can’t miss this opportunity.”

“In other words, we jump right in knowing it’s a trap?”

“Exactly,” Ariadne nodded. “We’ll have to be careful not to let our guard

down. Sara changed after she met Vivian, so..."

"...I'm pretty sure I'll be fine. I'm already a mage, after all." Actually, it wasn't clear why Vivian had shown any interest in me at all. "I think she probably has her eye on you. So you're the one who really needs to be careful."

"Yeah, probably..."

Ariadne took a deep breath, almost like a sigh, picked up her coffee cup, and took a sip. "In case anything happens to me...well, please get her out of there. Even if I can't."

"That sounds like a last request."

"That was the intention."

"In that case, I'm afraid I can't accept. I'll be in trouble if you die on me," I answered. "I'm holding you to your promise."

[Day Four Evening]

The following day, the two of us accompanied Vivian after class.

"Welcome to my lab. Come on in. I'm glad you're here. Very, very glad."

Wearing a wide smile, she showed us into her laboratory. It was a room at the end of the hall where she had held her lecture the day before. This small room, deep in the building, held all sorts of chemicals and research materials that were haphazardly strewn about the place.

Some mysterious liquid simmering in a pot, more strange fluids in glass vials, recipes and notes on the various concoctions...everything was right there in the open.

It was totally suspicious.

"....."

Vivian had readily welcomed us into her laboratory, but the young woman who was already waiting there seemed to have other opinions about our intrusion.

Sara fixed us with a harsh stare. "Welcome...", she said in a cold voice. It sounded like she might spit at us at any second.

It was obvious she hated us.

Vivian didn't seem to notice, and said, "I haven't introduced you yet, now have I? This is Sara. She's been helping me with my research for a little while now."

"...Hello."

Sara greeted us while looking down at the floor between her feet.

"I'm Elaina. Very pleased to meet you." I bowed but was ignored.

"Ariadne here. Good to meet you, Sara!" Ariadne waved, but was ignored.

It was like we weren't even there.

"Sorry about that...," Vivian chuckled tersely. "That girl can be so cold."

No, this is beyond cold. It's like she has no emotions.

Apparently, Sara was the only other person participating in Vivian's research. I wasn't sure why such a popular teacher would target a single student, or what kind of research they had been up to, but at least there weren't any other students being exploited. In this case, I was happy to be surprised.

"This is sudden, and I'm sorry to rush you, but I'd like your help with my research." Vivian clapped her hands together, then handed Ariadne and Sara each a piece of paper. "Ariadne, I'll ask you to procure ingredients, the same as Sara. Elaina, you'll mix the potions with me."

Sara seemed to expect this, for she simply said, "Understood," and shuffled out of the room.

Ariadne said, "Ah, well, I'll go with her..." She followed after Sara, looking a bit lost.

After the door closed with a bang, Vivian and I were left in the room.

"All right then, let's start mixing potions, shall we?" Vivian lined up several ingredients on top of her desk. "This is the recipe for an experimental potion." She handed me a piece of paper. "I'd like to try making it today, but...can you tell what it is?"

Creating a magical potion is a series of trial-and-error experiments, a process

by which a single perfect potion arises from a pile of innumerable failed attempts.

I was guessing that Vivian was still working through the failures.

“.....”

The ingredients in the recipe, precisely recorded on the sheet of paper I held in my hand, matched the many vials that Vivian had just lined up on the desk. I considered them carefully, trying to grasp what she was attempting.

Then I murmured, “...I don’t know.”

Vivian murmured, too. “My goodness... Well, you are still a student. I suppose it can’t be helped that you don’t know.” Then she said, “This is a new potion, and it will change the world. It’s very near completion, you know? I daresay that when this potion is perfected, there won’t be a single unhappy person left in the world.”

Of course, she was grinning widely as she spoke.

“.....”

The potion she was trying to make did not have a name. But judging from the ingredients lined up on the desk and the procedures outlined in the recipe, I could more or less tell what she was going for.

The potion that Vivian was trying to make would temporarily bind magical energy to a person’s body and give them the ability to control it.

It appeared to be a potion that would turn anyone into a mage.

At a glance, it certainly seemed like a revolutionary concoction, but...

“...But Vivian, this is...” One of the ingredients listed in the recipe was known to be toxic. It could be quite dangerous. “There’s no telling what effects this potion might have on the human body. Is it really all right to use this ingredient?”

“My goodness, of course it’s all right,” Vivian assented easily, as if it were totally natural to use the stuff, then said, “You can’t change the world without some sacrifice. In order to acquire magic powers, one has to pay the appropriate price. Isn’t that only natural?”

I didn't get it. What could possibly be worth experimenting with something so dangerous? What on earth could be driving her toward such a goal?

[Day Four Night]

"...In other words, Vivian is trying to make people like me extinct?"

Just as we had the day before, we were holding a strategy meeting at the bakery.

After listening to my report for some time, Ariadne started banging on the table with indignation.

"We absolutely cannot let her get away with this! Let's put a stop to that woman's so-called research right away!"

"Yeah, I thought you might say that. So today I swiped some of her research materials."

"You're a little sticky-fingered..."

"I thought you might say that, too."

But circumstances are circumstances. No way around it, right?

"Frankly speaking," I continued, "all of Vivian's potions incorporate very dangerous ingredients."

No wonder she'd kept her circle of associates as small as possible. If word got out that she was using toxic material in her potions, she would be driven out of the administration.

So, if that's what's going on...

"Then the reason that Sara is walking around like a zombie...must be the side effects of all the potions she's taken!"

Sara had chosen to assist Vivian's research into the dangerous potions. She was either a very good sport, or she had complete confidence in Vivian, or she was being forced somehow.

We couldn't deny any of these possibilities, but no matter where the answer lay, if we were to have any hope of rescuing Sara, we would have to stop Vivian.

"Anyway, it'll be all right as long as that woman doesn't complete her

research, right? As long as we make her think that it's absolutely impossible, right?"

"....." I was able to guess from the great quantities of research material in Vivian's lab that she had been working on this for quite a long time, and that she wasn't inclined to give up just because of a little failure, but...

"Do you have something in mind?"

"Of course, I do!"

She put her hands together and stood.

"We improvise something and get in her way!"

"....."

So that's a "no" then?

[Day Five Evening]

Ariadne turned out to have a pretty concrete plan for someone who claimed she preferred to improvise.

She'd filled me in on all the details earlier that morning. I was apparently going to play a critical role in the plan she'd concocted. As a matter of fact, the whole plan depended on me.

Phase One.

"Did the two of you collect all the potion necessities for me?" Vivian greeted Ariadne and Sara, who were returning from procuring ingredients, just as they had done the previous day.

Sara nodded in response, but Ariadne quietly shook her head.

"I wasn't able to gather my ingredients."

The bag that Ariadne was carrying looked pretty light. It was obvious that she hadn't been able to get everything.

She had gathered only enough to give the appearance of a genuine effort.

"Oh no...well, that can't be helped..." Vivian glanced into the bag and frowned, then said, "Well then, would you go out again and gather some more

for me?”

“Ah, my legs are a little tired. I can’t right now.”

Vivian was sure to interpret her flippant attitude as a sign of disrespect. However, that was exactly why Ariadne had settled on this strategy.

The plan was to weaken Vivian’s ability to think straight by making her angry.

.....

The first time I’d heard the plan, I’d wondered if Ariadne was all right in the head, but watching her implement her scheme, it looked like she was serious.

“...Well then, Elaina and Sara, will you go out foraging, please? Ariadne, you can assist me here.” Vivian quickly gave us new directions.

This, too, was part of Ariadne’s plan. She must have anticipated that Vivian would send me out to gather ingredients.

Phase Two.

I set off with Sara to search for the remaining ingredients.

As far as I could tell by looking at the list, Ariadne had mostly failed to collect several weeds that grew in the area.

“...I wonder why she wasn’t able to find a bunch of weeds. Is she an idiot?” Sara said venomously, looking down at a thick patch of them growing right in the middle of the courtyard.

“Maybe she didn’t want to touch them because they’re dirty?”

“.....”

That was where my conversation with Sara ended. The girl was obviously not the talkative type. She stayed silent as she cut down weeds and stuffed them into her bag.

A passerby might have mistaken her for a conscientious student volunteer, hard at work cleaning up the courtyard.

“How long have you been helping Vivian with her research, Sara?” I tried making small talk as we worked.

“...About a week, now.” This time she gave me a proper answer.

“Interesting. So... Why did you decide to assist her, anyway?”

“...Have you heard about the potion she’s trying to make?”

“Yeah, kind of.” I looked at Sara. She was silently staring down at the weeds with vacant eyes. “It’s a potion that can turn someone into a mage, isn’t it?” I said.

“That’s right... I think that the professor’s plan is incredible. Because once everyone can use magic, no one will have to suffer hardship ever again.”

“You think people are unhappy because they can’t use magic?”

“Of course, they are,” she answered decisively. Her eyes were still dark. “You can’t help but notice it here, in this university where mages and...people like me are all collected in one place. You notice the difference between us and the students who can use magic.”

“.....”

She was probably referring to things like the class that Vivian had been teaching. It was a required subject at the university, but the class was obviously meant for mages. For the students who couldn’t use magic, it was nothing but an unpleasant waste of time.

Even though they also taught ordinary subjects at the school, there were also a number of courses exclusive to magic users. The magical pharmacology class I had taken two days ago was one of those.

In this way, the ordinary students were treated with discrimination, and were probably always haunted by the perception of inferiority.

“...So, you want the power to use magic so that you’ll feel better about yourself?”

“Yes, actually,” she said, “though I do have another, more significant reason.”

“...What is it?” I asked with a tilt of my head.

“I want to make my mother happy.”

Clearly. Decisively. In just a few words.

For the very first time, I saw a flicker of light in her eyes.

Phase Three.

We returned with ingredients—or rather, weeds—in hand. Next, we were to assist Vivian, and she would show us how to complete the potion. That said, I was the only one who actually assisted.

“All right, Elaina, channel some of your magical energy into the mixture.”

“Okay.”

“Good job. All right, next, stir it around three times, then channel even more magical energy.”

“Okay.”

I did as I was told, like a puppet. In contrast, Sara sat vacantly staring at the pot in my hands, and Ariadne was fidgeting off to the side.

We were waiting for the right moment to execute the third part of our plan. Ariadne and I occasionally gave each other sidelong glances as we waited for what came next.

And then...

“Ah! The headmaster is outside!”

When the potion was nearly complete, Ariadne suddenly stood and shouted as she pointed out the window.

The headmaster.

Ariadne assumed that, for Vivian, who was using dangerous ingredients to create a potion under a veil of secrecy, there could be no more formidable enemy.

Vivian and Sara only looked up from the bubbling cauldron for a second.

...They looked right at Ariadne, who had suddenly shouted strangely. “Oh, come on,” she muttered.

But any chance is a good chance.

During that moment of golden opportunity, I seized the weeds I had gathered

earlier, and tossed them all into the pot.

This was phase three of the plan: in short, to ruin the potion when it was nearly complete. While I was picking weeds earlier, I had taken the opportunity to stick some random flowers and grasses in among them.

Any deviation from the recipe should cause problems with the finished product.

Finally, the potion was complete.

“It’s finished.” Vivian took some of the dubious-colored liquid from the pot and put it into a vial. “Here, Sara. Try this.”

She handed it over, full of confidence—the result of today’s efforts.

Though, of course, the potion in the vial was a failure.

“Thank you very much.”

Sara obediently accepted the vial.

And then, here was where the final stage of the plan came into play.

“I’ll drink it!”

Ariadne snatched away the vial containing the potion we had sabotaged. Tossing it all back with a single gulp, Ariadne then spit up some bubbles and collapsed.

This was the culmination of the plan.

Sara had consumed these concoctions many times before, but Ariadne had basically no experience drinking magic potions. She had no tolerance for them. Factor in the botched potion, and it was no wonder she’d collapsed.

“A-are you all right? Hey, Ariadne...? Ariadne!”

Vivian was in a total panic. She scooped the girl up in her arms and dashed out of the room in a hurry.

The two of us were left behind.

“...What is with that girl?”

I still remember the disgusted look in Sara’s eyes.



“...I left Ariadne in the infirmary to rest. She’ll probably come around soon.”

Vivian returned after some time, looking exhausted.

...I’ll go pick her up later.

“Is Ariadne always like that?” Vivian frowned.

“...Sort of.”

It had only been six days since I’d met the girl, so I didn’t actually know her that well.

“Is that so...? She really is so very unhappy living without magic, eh? Well, as long as there are people without magic, there will be many more pitiful cases like her...”

“.....”

Well, I don’t know if I’d call her pitiful. Really, she’s just a plain old idiot, but...

I didn’t say that.

“But the fact that Ariadne collapsed must mean that the potion we made today was a failure. That’s too bad.” Vivian hadn’t realized that Ariadne and I had altered the formula. “Let’s turn this round’s failure into the next round’s success. There’s no time to lose... No time at all...”

Vivian seemed like a woman pursued by something, and she muttered to herself as she started rummaging through her books and scrolls on potions.

I didn’t understand what could possibly be driving her to such great lengths. It was like this obsession with turning every human into a mage was eating away at her.

“...Why are you so determined to create a potion that can turn people into mages?” I asked.

Vivian answered, “I haven’t told you yet, have I?” Her eyes narrowed as she gazed vacantly out the window at the rays of the setting sun. She looked like she was brooding on an old memory. As if she was regretting having let something go. Her eyes were brimming with sorrow.

“I first decided to try to make this potion back when I was a student at this very university.”

And then, she told me a story from long ago.

It took place seventeen years earlier.

Vivian, still a student at the time, was recognized as a rare child prodigy. She was only fourteen years old, but she was taking classes that covered the same material as the eighteen-year-old students. And on top of that, she had some genuine magical talent. It was only natural that she won many accolades.

But Vivian had never been known as the most brilliant student in school. There was another student with whom she shared the distinction.

Her name was Elizabeth, and she was a normal, non-magical student. She couldn't use magic, true, but her grades were even better than Vivian's. People said that there was no one who could rival her academically. On top of that, Elizabeth was very caring, and everyone around her trusted her deeply. She was a paragon of human kindness. Vivian looked nostalgic as she told me this.

Even though both of them were recognized as young geniuses, Vivian, who was a lot younger than most of her classmates, garnered a great deal of jealousy from the other students, and had a completely different school experience than Elizabeth did.

You might expect the two of them to have been bitter rivals, but in truth, they had been the best of friends.

They went out of their way to take the same classes, ate lunch together in the courtyard, and met up at the bakery-café after school. The two geniuses spent their days together just like ordinary students.

“Elizabeth, I have a dream.”

One day, when they were chatting between classes, young Vivian suddenly said, “I want to be a teacher at this school. I want to teach everyone magic.”

Elizabeth nodded at her friend's words, “That's great! I want to do the same,” she answered.

Just like Vivian, Elizabeth also wanted to take a teaching position after

graduation. Both friends shared the same goal, and that had brought them even closer together.

However, it wasn't long before their amicable relationship fell apart at the seams.

It happened one day when graduation was close at hand. Every graduating student was thinking about their future, but only two had made any decisions.

They were Vivian and Elizabeth.

The school made potential new instructors wait to apply until all the other acceptances for employment and continuing studies were finalized. That meant that if they weren't accepted by the school, they would be in a difficult situation without any other prospects. The aim was to weed out any candidates who weren't dedicated enough to risk that possibility.

There were two teaching positions available. The two geniuses, hoping to pass the exam together, had passed up every other opportunity for employment or continuing education in order to become teachers.

Finally, they took the exam.

However...

"When I looked at the results, I saw that I was the only one who had passed the test. Unfortunately, Elizabeth wasn't accepted. She never became a teacher."

"....."

"She had always been a better student than me, but the administration didn't care. Magic was more important than academics, or anything else, really. That's the only reason I was chosen."

The committee had determined that, while good grades were important, being a mage mattered much, much more, and that had been the basis for their decision. Elizabeth, it was decided, lacked the single most significant qualification for the job.

"...What happened to Elizabeth after that?"

Vivian shook her head slowly. "...Who knows? After what had happened,

things could never be the same for us. I never saw her again. Knowing her, I bet she's out there making her own way in life, but..."

But Vivian had clearly never gotten over what had happened that day.

If Elizabeth had been a mage, she would probably have an important teaching position right now, just like her friend, and the two of them would probably still be together. Such a small difference should not have been enough to separate them.

That was why.

"So that's why you want to make everyone in the world a mage?"

"Yes..." She nodded slowly. "When this potion is completed, there will be no more students crying just because they cannot use magic. That is my wish..."

She looked out the window again.

I could see what appeared to be unwavering determination in her eyes as they reflected the rays of the setting sun.

Before long, it was time to adjourn for the evening.

Sara and I were sent home while Vivian stayed behind, saying that she still had some work to do on her own, or something. She seemed completely obsessed with her research.

I carried the still-groaning Ariadne home on my back. Sara walked alongside me, staring at Ariadne with cold eyes. The road was surrounded on all sides by darkness.

"The professor wants to repair a relationship that was severed a long time ago," Sara suddenly said. "That's why I'm helping her. And if anyone tries to get in her way...I will absolutely not allow it."

Could she be on to us?

"Well then, all right. You have to do what you think is right," I answered, averting my eyes. "But I still don't understand why you're willing to risk your life to help her. Do you owe her or something?"

"Risking my life? I don't know what you're talking about."

“Aren’t you, though? Today Ariadne happened to drink the failed potion and collapsed, but you’re routinely exposed to those concoctions, aren’t you? Many of the ingredients are harmful to the human body. I can’t imagine you’re actually all right.”

“I am. I’m fine,” she answered indifferently. “If the professor’s dream can be realized with a small sacrifice on my part, I’ll endure anything. If no one does, then she’ll never finish it, no matter how long she works.”

Both Sara and Vivian seemed to be obsessed with the same idea—consumed with the belief that people could not be happy without magic.

“Tomorrow afternoon, come to the lecture hall. There’s something I want to talk to you about.” Sara eventually said. “Just you and Ariadne. Be there.”

[Day Five Night]

“So that’s what’s going on. I think it’s obvious that the target has caught on to our plan.”

I had headed for the bakery after parting ways with Sara, where I sat with Ariadne, who had finally woken back up, and shared all the details of our present situation.

“What are you talking about?” she answered. “I don’t think they’re on to us at all...”

“How can you say that with a straight face?”

Ariadne’s cavalier attitude was definitely going to get us caught. Though honestly, when I had agreed to this plan I had known very well that we would eventually be found out.

Ariadne continued, sipping her coffee as she had the day before. “But getting caught could be a good opportunity, in a sense. We would finally get that woman to unmask herself.”

“Well, I suppose I should be grateful that she chose tomorrow,” I replied. “I was hoping to settle all this by then anyway.”

I didn’t want this to be a drawn-out war.

Ariadne and I weren’t supposed to be at this school in the first place, after all.

“Elaina,” Ariadne raised her coffee cup toward me as she spoke. “Tomorrow, let’s definitely rescue that girl.”

“...I’ll handle it.” I copied her and raised my cup as well.

“Give it everything you’ve got.”

As she spoke, Ariadne gently clinked my cup with hers.

A quiet tinkling sound filled the air between us.

Curls of steam rose from the cups and disappeared.

[Day Six Afternoon]

“Magic is everything!”

A thunderous roar reverberated around the lecture hall.

Then, Vivian attacked us straight on.

Ariadne grabbed my blazer, and I pushed her hard on the back as we dodged the oncoming gust. The wind rushed past us and slammed into the wall of the lecture hall, carving a deep crack before abating.

Invisible wind magic.

I knew that if we had taken a direct hit from such a spell, we probably would’ve been crushed flat.

That’s how dangerous this wind magic was.

However...

“You also taught your students ways to counter wind magic, right?”

I waved my wand. Immediately, a pale fog spewed forth from the tip, quickly spreading to fill the lecture hall. Everything looked white and cloudy.

“This way we can see the movement of the wind, right?”

The most troublesome thing about someone using wind spells is that they’re naturally invisible. But if you can figure out a way to see them, they’re not really a big deal. The fog would make the path of the wind quite obvious, so that we could easily defend against any kind of breezy attack.

“Now, come at me from any direction!” I challenged. “I’ll repel your attacks

without breaking a sweat!”

I could vaguely see Vivian’s outline in the fog.

“My, my...you really were paying attention in class, weren’t you? What a good student. How clever you are.” A voice rang out in the fog. “But you’re in trouble if you think that’ll be enough.”

The fog stirred.

I could see all sorts of lights flashing in the hazy white clouds.

I couldn’t tell exactly what they were until they got closer, but I did recognize a cluster of high-powered magical projectiles.

They flew at me with enough force to cut lines through the fog. Pillars of ice. Balls of flame. All sorts of weapons formed out of light.

“If your opponent can’t see, then neither can you, right?” Vivian said. Well, how about it? Are you able to take me down among all this?”

“.....”

“Come on, what happened?” she taunted. “You only want to play defense? What’s the matter; can’t you counterattack—?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t waste so much energy on pointless banter!”

I sent a sudden blast of wind in the direction of Vivian’s voice. The fog split open, and for a second, I could clearly see the other side of the lecture hall.

There was no one there.

...Did she dodge?

“Don’t forget that I’m here, too.”

“...!”

A voice behind my back...and it wasn’t Ariadne’s. It was much too cold.

I’d been so focused on searching the fog that by the time I turned around it was already too late.

“You can’t do anything without this!” Sara suddenly leaped out of the fog and snatched away my wand. She must have been trying to protect her teacher,

despite her lack of magic, and had assumed that taking my wand would leave me powerless.

But...

“Of course, I didn’t forget about you.”

I pulled a second wand out of my breast pocket and blasted Sara with a gust of wind.

“...Ah...ugh...!”

Sara went flying, still clutching my stolen wand. She fell with a clatter in between the benches that were arranged around the lecture hall.

Before she could stand up, I trapped her under a bench. She wouldn’t be attacking me again.

“Did you think that mages only carry one wand?”

There was no response from Sara.

“She knows better than that,” a bold voice said from somewhere nearby. “But she did manage to buy enough time for me to get close to you.”

At this distance, I could make her out quite well.

Vivian had her wand thrust at my throat.

Apparently, she had drawn right up behind me without my noticing.

“.....” I slowly readied my wand.

“If I see another threatening move, I’ll blow your face right off your head.”

She jabbed me hard with her wand.

“.....”

I prepared myself to surrender. Still holding my wand, I raised both hands above my head. “You wouldn’t dare! I’m too pretty.”

“Wow. You still have a sense of humor, huh? Or maybe you just don’t realize how much trouble you’re in.”

“No, no.” I shook my head. “Neither of those things is true.”

“Then, what is it?”

Well, since you asked...

“I’m just that confident, I guess.”

My eyes moved to peer beyond Vivian. She followed my gaze, turned around to look, and I blasted her wand out of her hand.

“You’re not the only ones who can strike from behind!”

Ariadne, who had been hidden behind me, was now standing behind Vivian.

Vivian looked surprised for a moment, but then...

“How naive!”

Quickly, she stuck a hand into her breast pocket just as I had.

“Hyah!”

I hit her with another blast of wind. The spare wand that she had been trying to retrieve from her robe went flying out of her hand.

“I knew that you would expect me to create fog, then plan your attacks accordingly,” I explained. I thrust my wand toward her neck, just as she had done earlier to me. It was like we had swapped places. “Too bad you’re so easy to read.”

I’d figured if I conjured up a fog, Vivian was almost certain to try and attack me from behind. I had also anticipated that she would try to make use of her companion, Sara.

Then I had just stayed in her sights and waited for Sara to appear.

They must have thought they had sprung their trap quite successfully.

But they were the ones who had been trapped.

“You’ve lost,” I said, gathering energy into the wand pressed against Vivian’s neck. “Please surrender quietly. You will stop the suspicious research you’ve been conducting immediately. And you will set Sara free.”

Vivian glared at me. “Is that what the two of you were after? You wanted to rescue Sara?”

I nodded. “You’ve made her a guinea pig for your research, and it’s having strange effects on her body, isn’t it?”

“.....” Vivian hesitated, and then said plainly, “It is. But it was her choice. We’re only trying to make our dream—hers *and* mine—come true.”

“You’re saying that this is what Sara wanted, even if it had negative effects on her body?”

“You can never achieve anything without some sacrifice. Sara and I both resigned ourselves to that fact.”

Vivian was still somewhat obscured by the fog, but her voice was crystal clear. “Both Sara and I wish for a world where everyone can use magic. When we make that happen, I am certain we will put an end to the world’s suffering...”

“.....”

“I talked about this yesterday, didn’t I? This world is a cruel place for people without magic. Discrimination, oppression... They have no hope. Well, I’m tired of living in a world like that. Th-that’s why... So that there is never another Elizabeth, I...”

“You truly are a fool.”

Ariadne was the one who interrupted Vivian’s speech.

Shrugging her shoulders in disgust, she had some words of her own.

“People are miserable because they don’t have magic? How did you come to that conclusion? Do you even know what happened to Elizabeth after graduation?”

“...How could *you* know such a thing?” Vivian muttered.

“You see, I heard,” Ariadne continued, ignoring her. “I heard that after Elizabeth graduated, she inherited the family bakery. Then she got married, had a child, and had a normal, happy life. She didn’t get the job she dreamed of long ago, but I certainly don’t think the life that Elizabeth led after that dream was destroyed has been an unhappy one. It’s an ordinary, average life, but she appreciates every moment of it.”

“.....”

Vivian’s eyes were wide.

“How could you possibly know about her?”

As far as Vivian knew, Elizabeth’s story was a secret that she told only to those very close to her.

It wasn’t hard to imagine her surprise.

“How, you ask...?” Ariadne cackled. “I know Elizabeth’s story...because I am Elizabeth.”

And then, the fog lifted.

[Day One Afternoon]

The first place I visited, immediately after arriving in the Commonwealth of Latorita, was a bakery on the corner of two streets. The bread there had quite the reputation among bread enthusiasts.

It’s crazy delicious.

It’s too tasty. Like, face-meltingly good.

It’s way too good, like if you eat it, you’ll die.

It’s basically poison.

I was sure that the last one was just a bad review.

Of course, me being a self-professed lover of all things bread, my feet practically moved on their own.

But...

“.....Huh. It’s not that good.”

To be completely honest, it wasn’t just mediocre. It was downright bad.

I wasn’t sure whether the flavor or the texture was worse. Clearly, something had gone fundamentally wrong somewhere along the line. This bread wasn’t tasty. I was terribly disappointed.

“Excuse me!” I clapped my hands and called out to the shop clerk. “Would you please summon the baker who made this?”

The clerk said, “Uh-huh...” and, wearing a sour expression, disappeared into

the back room of the shop.

By the way, that shop had an area with seats for dining, and it was the rare sort of bakery that served coffee as well.

"It's not delicious...is it? I see...I suppose not..." A haggard-looking woman in her thirties appeared from the back of the store. The arms that extended from her baker's smock were white and thin, and her red hair dangled limply from her head.

"I'm sorry... The truth is...most of the food has been on the shelves since yesterday... You see...I'm thinking of closing up shop soon..."

"Closing up shop...?"

I was shocked.

Close up shop? Did she really just say that? Seriously? Wait, this bread has been sitting out since yesterday? Well, that explains why it doesn't taste good.

"...Um, did something happen? Would you like to tell me your story?"

"...It's not the sort of story you tell a passing witch... It's a private matter."

"Aww, c'mon. Come and sit." I practically forced the bakery owner to sit opposite me. "Okay, there we go. Now, this bakery has quite the reputation among travelers; the bread you make is supposed to be exquisite. But right now, you are not living up to that reputation, you see?"

"Uh...so now I suppose you're going to tell everyone that this bakery sells terrible, disgusting bread...ah-ha-ha...what a fool I've been."

"This is no joke! Pull yourself together, please. This is serious."

I shook the owner's shoulder vigorously as she gazed out the window with lifeless eyes.

And then, large tears rolled down her cheeks.

"...*Sniff*. I'm sorry...! The truth is, my daughter... My daughter disappeared..."

Then the shop owner suddenly burst into sobs.

After that, she told me about her situation little by little, bawling as she spoke.

To summarize, the woman and her daughter had gotten into a big argument. That was not so unusual, especially because the daughter seemed to be at the rebellious age. The mother wanted her daughter to inherit the bakery, but the girl had run away from home saying she wanted to become a mage.

Actually, what had originally shocked Elizabeth—that was the mother’s name—had been her daughter’s insistence that she would never be happy until she learned to use magic.

Elizabeth told me about her daughter leaving the house. About how she was being used as a test subject for some kind of suspicious research. And about who was conducting that research. I think what had shocked Elizabeth just as much as her daughter’s departure was the fact that the person directing it all, guided by the belief that everyone who was not a magic user must be miserable, was an old friend of hers.

That explained why Elizabeth wasn’t making any bread.

“So in other words, if we get your daughter back, you can go back to making delicious bread again?”

“Huh? Sure...I guess...yeah...”

“I see, I see.” I nodded. “All right, let’s go help her. Together.”

“Help...huh? Together? Why?”

“I don’t know what your daughter looks like. Or the teacher.”

“But...won’t I stand out...?”

“What’s the problem? You have an old school uniform, don’t you?”

“I do have one... And I think I can still squeeze into it...but, me? At this age...?”

“Ah, that won’t be a problem.” I gestured for her to wait and dug through my bag until I came up with a single small vial.

It was a potion that had been forced into my hands by a girl, sometime, in some other place, far away. That potion was imbued with a very special magic.

“If you drink this potion, it can make you appear younger. You’ll look young enough to blend in at school, with years to spare.”

She wouldn't appear to be an adult at all. So, that solved that.

"B-but..."

"Let's do it. Absolutely."

"You're really eager..."

"I really want to eat that bread." I leaned forward decisively. "Once we take your daughter back, you can treat me, okay? So, let's go help your daughter."

We didn't have a second school uniform for me to wear, so I hastily whipped up a decent look-alike and we headed out.

That was how we infiltrated the university.

Thinking about it now, the promise of delicious bread was about all it took to get me to spring into action. (One of us had to show some initiative.) But the more I learned about Vivian and Elizabeth, the more I knew I had to help these women.

Because the idea that every person who cannot use magic must be constantly miserable is just too heartbreaking.

"...Understood. I promise. Once we have my daughter... Once we have Sara back, I'll get serious and make you all the bread you want."

At least, this woman, nodding vigorously to me, didn't look like she was miserable.

The woman before me had fire in her eyes.

[Day Six Afternoon]

As it turned out, though we both went in with the goal of rescuing Elizabeth's daughter, both of us also really enjoyed the return to student life. Maybe that's why we nearly got snared by our own scheme. But at any rate, we had worked out a plan to make contact with Vivian and then rescue Sara before the effects of the age-regression potion wore off.

And that was why Elizabeth—going by the name of Ariadne—now had Vivian cornered.

"You are...Elizabeth...?" Vivian's face contorted in bewilderment. "You

certainly do resemble the Elizabeth I knew so long ago, but...but, how? How can this be real?"

When she had laid eyes on Ariadne, Vivian had probably noticed a close resemblance to Elizabeth, and may have even seen something of herself in the witch standing next to her—in me. And there was no doubt that the family resemblance between Sara and her mother was also why Vivian had chosen the girl to join her in her research.

Vivian was imprisoned by her past.

"So you think that because I couldn't follow my childhood dream and become a teacher, I must be miserable?" Ariadne laughed quietly. "Listen...I'm actually pretty glad that I wasn't able to become a teacher. Sure, I used to hate the idea of inheriting the family bakery, but after I grew up and gave it a chance, it was more fun than I expected. I met a great guy, and I also had Sara."

Ariadne quickly glanced across the lecture hall.

Sara was standing there among the desks, looking at us with a confused expression.

She and Vivian were utterly dumbfounded. I'm sure they were surprised by everything that was happening.

Ariadne continued, ignoring their shock. "I'm sorry. After graduating, I never saw you again. So, I never realized... I never knew you felt this way."

"...No," Vivian muttered.

"You've been holding on to these feelings ever since the day I failed the teacher's exam, haven't you?" Ariadne continued. "Even now that you're all grown up..."

"...No, this isn't right. I..." Vivian was hanging her head, just like a little child. "I... I only wanted to make it so that it would never happen again... So that nobody else would have to face that kind of discrimination..."

"You don't need to concern yourself with that." Ariadne shrugged. "No one's doomed to live a life of misery because of a single broken dream, in the same way that no one is guaranteed happiness even if all their dreams come true."

Besides, I for one, do not think I would be very happy even if Sara did learn magic, if *this* is what it costs.”

Constantly drinking untested potions made with toxic ingredients was clearly taking a great toll on Sara. And as the girl slowly limped over to her mother, it was obvious from the way she walked that she was not doing well at all.

“...Are you all right?” I moved to help her, letting the girl lean on me. I felt guilty for blasting her with wind earlier.

Sara gave me a slight nod. “...Mm,” Then she stared at Ariadne. “...Mom, is that you? Really?”

The resemblance was unmistakable, now that it had been pointed out, though slight enough that it had gone unnoticed until now. It helped that they had different hair colors.

“Shall we go home, Sara?” Ariadne gently embraced her daughter. “Please don’t sadden your mother any further.”

Caught in her mother’s arms, Sara responded, “...Mm-kay.” She nodded slightly again, and let her eyes close.

Vivian was standing there staring at the two, until Ariadne suddenly wrapped an arm around her as well. “Let’s stop this already, Vivian,” she said as she pulled her into the embrace.

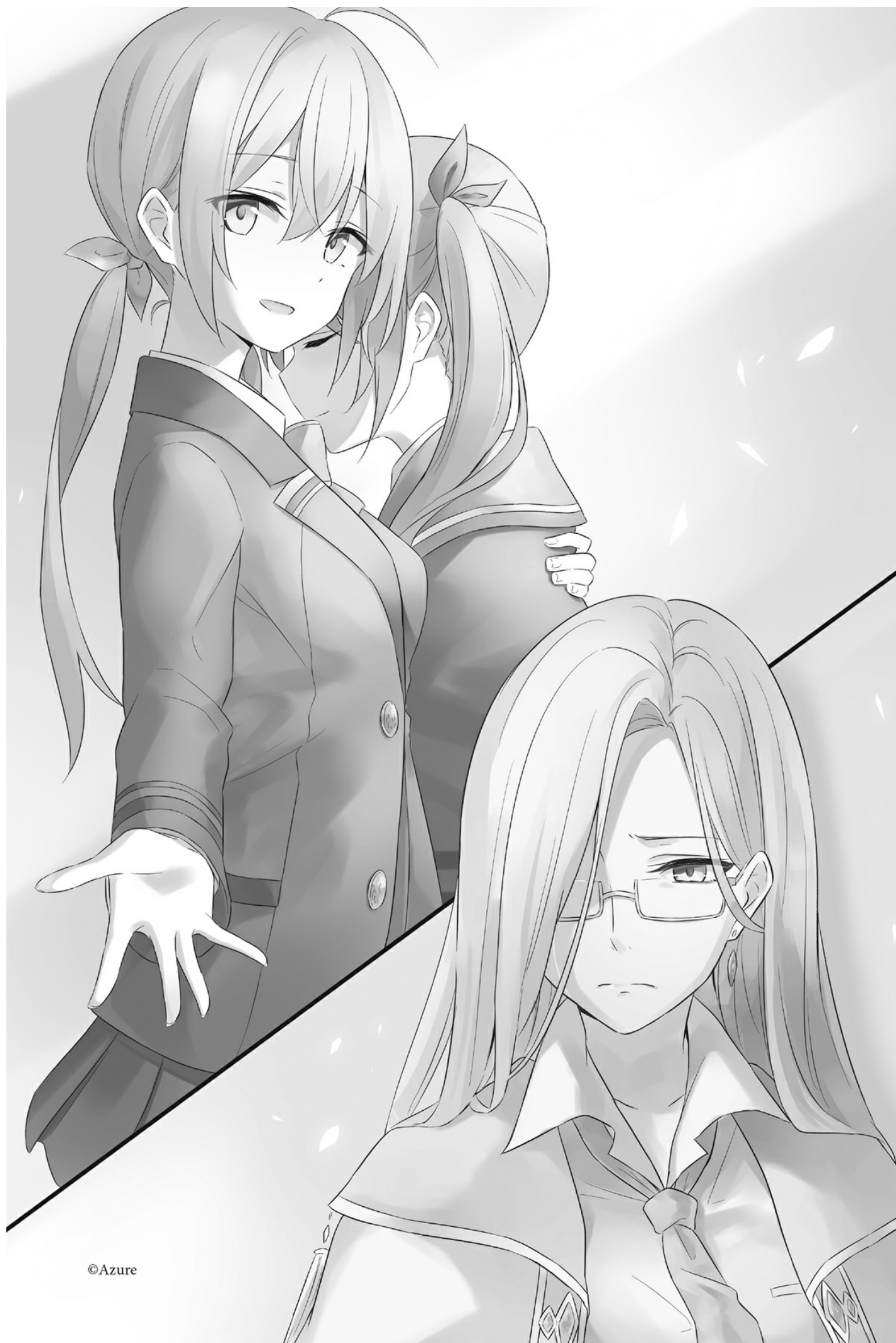
And then...

“Please, I don’t want to spoil any more of our memories together.”

Ariadne said nothing more.

Her words had been enough.

The two of them, Sara and Vivian, wrapped up in Ariadne’s—in Elizabeth’s—embrace, were silent, like babies that had cried themselves to sleep.



*

[Day Seven Afternoon]

I stopped in at my new favorite bakery-café for lunch.

Until then, I had always visited on my way back from school, but that day was a weekend day. And as one might expect, the place was rather crowded.

“Do you mind sharing a table today?”

In fact, it was so busy that the usual waitress had to ask me that.

I nodded, and she showed me to a seat by the window.

“...Eh?”

I gasped when I saw who was waiting. The two people who were already sitting across from each other at the window-side table had similar reactions. They both looked troubled.

“...Elaina.”

“...Hey.”

It was Sara and Vivian.

I greeted the pair with a simple “hello” and sat down across from them.

I ordered coffee and bread from the waitress, and then looked over at Sara while I waited for my food to arrive. Her complexion had already improved somewhat.

“You’re not drinking the potions anymore?” I inquired.

She nodded ever so slightly. “...Well, we did abandon our research. There’s no reason to destroy my health,” she said.

Ultimately, after everything that had transpired, Vivian had given up on creating a potion that could turn ordinary people into mages. She had heard from Ariadne—from Elizabeth herself—that there was no need for a potion like that. Even if she succeeded, it wouldn’t mean anything.

After that, the three of us talked for a while, sitting together at the window-side table.

Apparently, Vivian had been spending all her days off working on her potion, and now that she was done with the research, she would have a lot more free time. Sara was the same way. Since she didn't need to work on the research anymore, there was no need for her to stay at Vivian's house. As of yesterday, she had returned home.

"In short, I am an ordinary teacher, and Sara is once again an ordinary student."

"How utterly unremarkable."

"I know. But, well, I have to admit, we're not unhappy after all."

"Well then, that's great."

We suddenly found ourselves smiling at each other, and that's when the waitress brought over my bread and coffee.

"Here you are, sorry for the wait. Some of my very best bread, made with gratitude."

It wasn't the waitress after all.

It was Ariadne, but...

The effect of the potion that I had given her had worn off, and Ariadne was no longer a young school girl. She was once again an adult woman.

"Okay, it's fresh out of the oven, so it's a little hot. Be careful when you eat it, all right?"

Ariadne, or rather, Elizabeth, smiled. It was the smile of a caring mother.

"How about joining us, Ariadne?" We were sitting at a four-person table, after all. I patted the open seat in invitation, but she shook her head slowly.

"I would really love to eat with you, but I have work to do." Elizabeth shrugged. "Well, please enjoy. Our bread is the very best, after all!"

The gloomy woman I had seen when we had first met was nowhere to be seen.

I placed a hand over my bread as I watched her walk away. It was still hot. I savored the comforting warmth.

“Come to think of it, what are you going to do now, Sara?” I tilted my head questioningly as I tore my bread into pieces. “Will you take over your mother’s shop?”

“I’m planning to give that some thought.” She tore her bread up in the same way and popped a small piece into her mouth. “But probably, almost certainly, I think I’ll take over after Mom.”

But she told me she wanted to think about that after studying more in school. It was a completely ordinary idea.

The girl there with us was entirely unremarkable; a girl who didn’t know what to do with her future. That, too, was completely ordinary.

“Well, I think that’s great.” I nodded, then followed Sara’s lead and dug into my bread. The fragrance of wheat filled my nostrils. The soft texture melted in my mouth. The bread was so delectable that when I bit into it, I couldn’t help but smile.

It was enough to make me want to go on eating it forever.

“It’s so good...,” I mumbled happily.

“...I’m going to start coming here often...” Vivian nodded decisively.

“I eat it all the time, so...” Sara shrugged and smiled.

And in this way, we spent an ordinary afternoon together.

Although for a traveler like me, sharing a meal with friends is not actually all that ordinary. But still.

Extraordinary things do happen sometimes, and it’s that much nicer when they do.

Afterword

On a certain day in 2017:

“Heh-heh-heh... *Journey of Elaina*, Volume 5 should start circulating any day now... Huh? What’s this? There are a whole lot of Twitter posts about buying it this time around...? Huh? Whaaat? I can’t keep up at all... What on earth is going on here...? The signed copies sold out right away...? Huh? What...in the world...?”

“Jougi.”

“Editor! What’s going on here...?”

“It looks like the initial response to Volume Five was quite good.”

“You can say that agaaaaaaain! Whooo-hoooooooooooo!”

“We’re doing a second printing.”

“Even though it’s only been a week since it went on saaale? Five volumes, and this is the first one that got an instant second printing? All riiiiiiiiiiiiight!”

“There’s also talk of a drama CD and possibly a manga.”

“Seriouslyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy?!”

“You’re awfully loud.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!”

“Shut up.”

“...Okay.”

Hello everyone, it’s been a while. Or maybe this is our first meeting. I’m Jougi Shiraishi.

All sorts of things have happened recently. Honestly, it’s been a lot to take in. But even as prone to absentmindedness as I am, I managed to finish Volume 6.

Ever since Volume 5 went on sale...or rather, around the time it started really selling...there were all sorts of developments. Elaina was featured in the GA Novels Big Three Heroine Fair for books already in publication, and I was thrilled to hear discussions about turning the series into a comic and a drama CD. Up until now, I was troubled, and troubled, and troubled some more. Sometimes I could hardly write because I was so worried, and other times I would steep myself in sentimentalism, and I often suffered from a terrible fear that I would be canceled right then and there. But at last, I feel as if my flower has bloomed. Hooray for that.

I have every intention of continuing to work hard into 2018 as well. I will have made it through one of my unlucky years, too! Though nothing really unlucky happened anyway.

All right then, before getting down to business, I'd like to give my commentary on each of the chapters in *Journey of Elaina*, Volume 6.

There are tons of spoilers coming up, so if those of you who like to read the afterword first would kindly skip the next three pages or so, that would be great.

Chapter 1: Broom Racing

I was thinking about the kinds of sports that mages might play and hit on the idea of a broom race. But then I decided that writing out "broom racing" every time would shoot my word count straight through the roof, so I came up with the abbreviation "BR."

Volume 5 ended with a certain finality, so I wrote this story as a kind of new start for Volume 6.

Chapter 2: A Thief and His Mother

A decisive battle against a son in his rebellious phase, and his doting mother. The maternal character was the main focus of this story, so the whole story turned out to have a soft and fluffy ending. I thought it might be nice to have at least one story that was happy from beginning to end, since Volume 6 also has some brutal chapters.

Chapter 3: An Honest Politician

This happened a long time ago, so I only remember it vaguely, but when I was still young, there was a special program broadcast on TV that insisted on the following theory.

It proposed that John F. Kennedy was in fact a very timid man, and it was actually his wife Jacqueline who got him elected president and who ran the country behind the scenes...

Apparently, it was his wife's idea that he would only wear black suits so that he'd look good on the black-and-white television of the era. That was only one of the many ideas that led to his presidency, and they were all worked out by his wife.

Now that I'm an adult, something about that intrigues me, so I looked into it. But unfortunately, I couldn't come up with any definitive proof. Still, I always wanted to write a story based on the relationship between Jacqueline and John Kennedy that existed in my imagination, so I finally made that come true. But the number one thing I wanted to convey with this story was the idea that being unknown is no different than not existing. Bearing that in mind always, I sincerely hope I can write stories that live on in people's hearts.

Chapter 4: The Story of a Disease, a Witch, and a Broom

We all get weak when we catch a cold, right? I understand. But when I reread my finished manuscript, I thought, "Who is this girl...?" Personally, I'm really pleased with the scenes where the broom picks the locks on the doors. I was trying to avoid using any existing characters in Volume 6, but the broom is Elaina's constant travel companion, so by that fuzzy logic, I included the broom in Volume 6 after all. I think she'll continue to appear regularly from now on, as well.

Chapter 5: The Cursed Servant

I've heard about a rather dangerous gem called the Hope Diamond, which, when I looked into it further, seems to have somehow brought about the deaths of each of its owners, and, as a result, is a legendary cursed gem that has moved around from place to place. That's all superstition, of course, and I don't really believe that any of it is true, but I found the idea of a cursed object that brought about its owner's death to be incredibly interesting, and started

thinking about how it would go if the object was personified. The result was this story, in which the “object” is cursed to be passed from one owner to the next and ultimately realizes that she is poisonous to the touch. Also, as I was finishing writing the manuscript for this story, a certain drama about a deadly kiss was airing and making a big splash.

Chapter 6: Elaina as a Child Witch

The actual idea to turn Elaina into a child is something I had been idly considering for quite some time. But before I could write it down, *Wandering Witch* went on hiatus, and *I’ve Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level*, published by the same label, used the same conceit, so I thought, “Uh-oh, this one’s just gonna get rejected, isn’t it?!” and shelved the idea for a long time. But as I was writing out the draft for Volume 6, I received a revelation. “Jougi...right now I am transmitting my words directly into your brain...you must write the child transformation story...” So I ended up writing it after all.

The character design for little Elaina is so adorable. I personally believe that it is cute enough to eliminate war from this world.

Chapter 7: To Know a Woman’s Heart

A succubus is a standard sex demon from the fantasy genre, but I wondered if a male demon would have a hard time with a similar way of life and turned the idea over in my head. By the way, I’ve always wondered: A sex demon’s main job is to bring people erotic dreams. But that doesn’t require them to have a particularly erotic appearance, now does it?

Chapter 8: Seven Days of Ariadne

When I struck on the idea to write this chapter, the first thing that gave me trouble was the question of how to handle chronological order. It seemed like if I told the story in order from the beginning, it would put me in the awkward situation of having to write an awful lot before the girls even started going to school. After being lost for a very long time, I decided to get rid of the problem by breaking chronological order a little bit and shifting around the beginning and end. I have always wanted to write a story in which Elaina goes to school, but I had yet to be blessed with the opportunity, so ultimately I decided to

make it the last chapter of Volume 6.

I digress, but when I received the three rough sketches of Elaina in her student uniform, they were all too cute, and I cried to myself, thinking, “How can they tell me to choose just one from these?! I can’t choose!” Ah, the life I lead...

That’s it for my comments on each chapter.

Volume 5 had a lot of cheerful stories—actually, it was mostly cheerful stories—so this time around I wanted to write a book that had plenty of variety. I personally like stories with a girl’s love component, but I also like hard-boiled stories, and of course comedy stories, and deeply moving plots as well. I’m very attached to *Journey of Elaina*, a series for which I can write all those kinds of stories, and I want to keep writing these books for a long time. I’m so glad that I could put out another volume...

This time there were very few appearances by established characters, but from the next volume on, I think I’d like to have them each appear again as guest characters in the longer sections.

The series has also grown quite lengthy, and before I knew it, we had reached Volume 6. Next is Volume 7. I’ll do my best so that it can keep going even longer.

This is a pretty rough segue, but around the end of 2017, I exercised a little for the first time in a while, and that was enough to injure my back and nearly kill me, so I want to make 2018 the year when I do a moderate amount of exercise. Seriously, though... Since I’m usually doing a job that doesn’t require a lot of moving, my physical strength is, well...it’s decreased, you know... Also, I purchased a Suica IC card quite a while ago, but thanks to buying a smartphone, I no longer have to tap the card at the train gate. I just touch my phone to the sensor and can pass right through the gate easily! The advancement of technology is amaaazing! It turned my Suica card into an ordinary piece of plastic! Though from the very start, the closest station to me has never been compatible with Suica, so it was just an ordinary piece of plastic all along! Ha-ha-ha-ha!

Well then, as always, I’d like to give some acknowledgments.

To Azure:

Thank you yet again for your adorable illustrations. My sincere apologies for leaving the design of so many characters up to you time after time... But they are the absolute cutest, so I hope I can rely on you for many years to come. Also, Elaina in her school uniform is too cute. Utterly sublime. Little Elaina is also cute. And Ariadne, the guest character for this volume, is cute and I love her. I always just go on about how cute the drawings are, huh...?

To the editor, M:

Thank you, as always. I felt so warm and fuzzy when you sent me the fan drawing of Elaina that your child put so much work into. I was really happy. Actually, I only just upgraded to a smartphone, and I didn't transfer my address book, so I had a major panic while I was working, like, "Wh-who is this?! M-m-m-my personal information has leaked out! Oh no!" But the happiness I felt was real. My panic was also real.

To everyone else involved:

Everyone in operations at SB Creative, everyone in the editorial department, all the bookstore employees, and everyone in the printing office. Everyone who was involved with this publication at all. Truly, thank you very much. Three years have passed quickly since my debut, but honestly, as the volumes pile up, I realize that light novels as a medium are able to come to publication because they are supported by many people... I thank you for your continuing support.

To all my readers:

Please continue to read *Journey of Elaina*!

A drama CD is coming out, to be packaged with Volume 8 when it goes on sale in November (Japanese pub date), so definitely check that out!

This afterword ended up getting long, but I'll wrap it up here, for I want to get back to my manuscripts. Let's meet again in Volume 7. See ya!

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